

# Beat the French Defense with 3.Nc3

A Complete Repertoire for White

Pentala Harikrishna



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# **Beat the French Defense with 3.Nc3**

## A Complete Repertoire for White

**by**

# Pentala Harikrishna

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# Key to Symbols

- ! a good move
- ? a weak move
- !! an excellent move
- ?? a blunder
- !? an interesting move
- ?! a dubious move
- <sup>TM</sup> only move

**N** novelty

‰ lead in development

⊙ zugzwang

= equality

∞ unclear position

© with compensation for the sacrificed material

<sup>2</sup> White stands slightly better

<sup>3</sup> Black stands slightly better

± White has a serious advantage

μ Black has a serious advantage

+− White has a decisive advantage

−+ Black has a decisive advantage

, with an attack

f with initiative

„ with counterplay

... with the idea of

<sup>1</sup> better is

$\leq$  worse is

+ check

**#** mate

# Preface

I always had a dream of becoming a chess author. As my years of experience and analysis grew, it was becoming a more and more frequent topic of discussions with my loved ones and friends. However, it is always difficult to make the leap from theorizing to making things a reality. Back in 2019, when I was approached by Thinkers Publishing about writing a book, I was initially inclined to refuse, as the year was incredibly packed with the Grand Prix, World Cup and many other high-stakes tournaments.

I am glad that my publisher did not give up on me after my initial doubts, and we managed to create a flexible timeline and work schedule. Every step toward finalizing the book brought me as much joy as some of the most memorable games of my chess career.

During my journey as a chess player, I have read many chess books which had a profound impact on me. I always admired authors who combined deep analysis with well thought-out explanatory comments and my admiration only grew throughout the process of writing the pages you are about to dive into. It is indeed a great challenge and now I can understand the immense satisfaction one can feel after completing a nice book.

Nowadays writing a book on the opening is always quite demanding, especially from the White side. With strong engines and correspondence games readily available to almost anyone in the world, it is hard to prove an advantage for White. Being able to come up with new ideas and having multiple weapons at your disposal, is a

definitive must in modern chess, and besides dealing with various sidelines, this book is really about having a fresh look at the French defense.

The French Defense was my main opening with Black while I was striving towards the GM title at the turn of the century. Quite often, I was able to use it to drag my opponent into a complicated maze of deep analysis, so I have intimate knowledge of the tricks used on the other side of the 'barricades'. This helped me craft a solid base for our present repertoire, and many of the ideas presented in the book have brought me fine victories against some of the strongest French exponents as well.

I'd also like to mention another very important piece of the puzzle: a sizable portion of the repertoire was already published in my online course named 'French Toast' on the Chessable platform, and the appreciation I received for the course was a huge incentive for me to turn it into a book. In this regard I have to thank both Thinkers Publishing and Chessable for helping me make my author's dream come true.

Variations are ordered according to their importance – if you are looking to start building your repertoire against the French Defense 'from scratch', the initial chapters will teach you how to deal with various suboptimal systems Black can employ. Gradually you will work your way through to 3...dxe4, 3...Nf6 and 3...Bb4, the most principled systems for Black.

I believe this approach will also help you build confidence, learning how to fight for advantages under objectively better circumstances first, without being burdened by heavy theory. Not to mention the practical value of learning



such lines: these dodgy lines are quite frequent guests in short time controls and in online blitz.

If you are an advanced reader, you might jump right into the three most principled systems – the slightly passive Rubinstein (3...dxe4) and Black's most fighting weapons 3...Nf6 and 3...Bb4. While the book is an ode to new ideas (and you will learn how to deal with all of the main lines with a fresh approach), I took the liberty of expanding your arsenal by offering both original and conservative (read: more theoretical) alternatives against 3...Nf6.

Besides giving you a deep and refreshing look at the French Defense, I am also hoping you gain a broader appreciation for how seemingly innocent ideas can often turn into dangerous ones, especially from the practical point of view. In many places you might discover that my is not the 'best' (as per the engines), but I believe in creating the most unpleasant situations for my opponents instead of fighting against their computer...

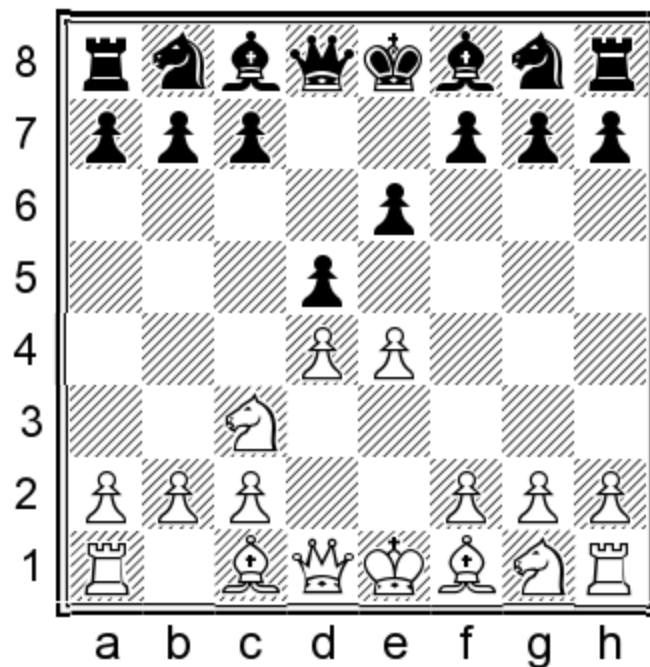
Stay safe, study chess and fear the French Defense no more!

P. Harikrishna  
November 2020

# Introduction

## 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5

The starting point of the French defense. It is a sound opening choice which has managed to stand the test of time, and we can sometimes see it being played even in high level games. Black's philosophy is similar to the one he employs in many semi-open variations. He lets White grab space in the center, but at the same time tries to counterattack it immediately, claiming the first player might be overextended. I chose 3.Nc3



*Position after: 3.Nc3*

for this book as it is the most principled response, developing the knight in the most active way possible while protecting White's central pawn. Now I consider 3...dxe4, 3...Nf6, and 3...Bb4 as the main possibilities for Black, as other moves have rather obvious downsides. However, one should always remember to do their homework and we will have a deeper look at sidelines like 3...h6, 3...a6, 3...c5, 3...Be7 and 3...Nc6 as well.

### **3...g6**

This is a move we don't consider in the following chapters but it has some logic too, intending to attack White's center with the dark-squared bishop from g7. It is not very harmonious though and White has a strong antidote.

**A)** On a waiting move like 3...h6 we simply continue our development with 4.Bd3, utilizing the 4...dxe4 5.Nxe4 Qxd4? 6.Bb5+!+- trick, winning the queen. Of course Black is not obliged to lose the game in five moves but as you'll see in the 3...h6 chapter, White is able to claim a sizeable advantage.

**B)** 3...a6 is a slightly better try but we dismantle it in a similar fashion as in the 3...h6 line, starting with the move 4.Bd3.

**C)** The violent 3...c5 would be a reasonable option for Black had White put their knight on d2 on the third move instead of on c3. However, thanks to the central pressure exerted by the c3-knight, we can simply capture the offered material with 4.exd5 exd5 5.dxc5, when Black is in trouble right out of the blocks.

**D)** 3...Be7 is another move which works much better against 3. Nd2 than in the current position. We pinpoint

the obvious drawbacks of the bishop move with 4.e5! c5 5.Qg4! when Black not only has problems developing the g8-knight because the e7-square is occupied, but they also need to defend the unprotected g7-square.

**E)** The only slightly offbeat variation remaining is 3...Nc6 which has in fact been employed by several strong grandmasters. Black is sometimes lacking the option of attacking White's center with ... c5, but it is a move which definitely has to be taken seriously. We will analyze two promising options for White: 4.e5 immediately closing the center; and 4.Nf3, aiming for more direct play. Ultimately the choice will be yours to make.

**F)** Out of the three main moves for Black, the Rubinstein variation (3...dxe4 4.Nxe4) is probably the easiest to play against. Given the fact that Black released the tension rather early they will often find themselves suffering for a long time in slightly cramped positions when White has a clear spatial advantage.

**G)** 3...Nf6 is, alongside 3...Bb4, one of the two most popular systems for Black by a long way. First we will explore many fresh ideas for White after 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2!?, sidestepping the heavy theoretical load that comes with including the most popular system with 5.f4 in one's repertoire.

**H)** However, if you wish for more advanced reading, you will not be disappointed as after 3...Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 we will have a complex look at the 5. f4 variation as well.

**I)** Finally 3...Bb4 is inviting White into the most complex and unbalanced French positions which arise after 4.e5 c5. We combat the so-called Winawer variation by means of 4.exd5!? claiming that Black's dark-squared bishop is not well placed on b4. Although the position is quite

symmetrical, we will often be able to make good use of the slightly misplaced b4-bishop and even launch an attack on the black king with quick queenside castling in some lines. It is very likely that your opponents will feel much less secure in the lines we recommend against the 3...Bb4 set-up, as Black usually focuses on the theoretical main lines instead.

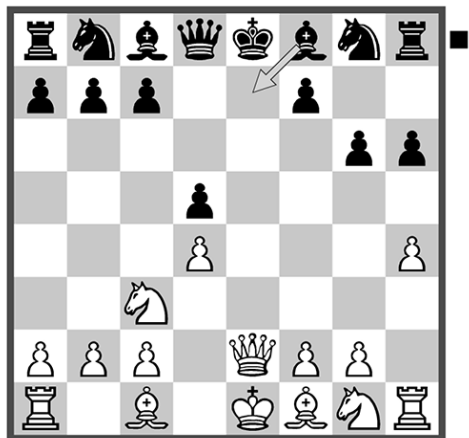
#### **4.h4!**

Provoking a weakness on the kingside.

4.e5 is also a possibility, limiting the scope of the f8-bishop. It would look rather useless on g7 with a white pawn placed on e5.

#### **4...h6 5.exd5!**

It will be very obvious that Black's pawn moves don't go well with the rest of his set-up after 5...exd5 6.Qe2+!



*Position after: 6.Qe2+!*

#### **6...Be7**

Forced, defying Black's own strategy of fianchettoing the bishop, as other moves are even worse.

**A)** 6...Ne7 7.Qe5 forces Black to make a really ugly rook-move.

**B)** 6...Qe7 simply loses a pawn to 7.Nxd5±.

**C)** Finally, 6...Be6 also loses a pawn to 7.Qb5+±.

### **7.Bf4±**

White will castle queenside and have a great position, where they could continue with Nf3-e5 for example.

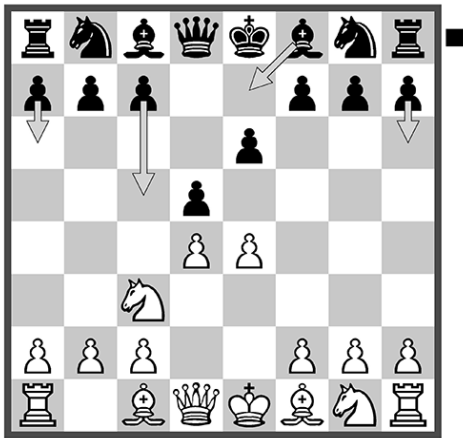
# **Part I**

## **Odds and Ends**

# Chapter 1

## Odd 3rd moves

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3



## Chapter Guide

### Chapter 1 - Odd 3rd moves

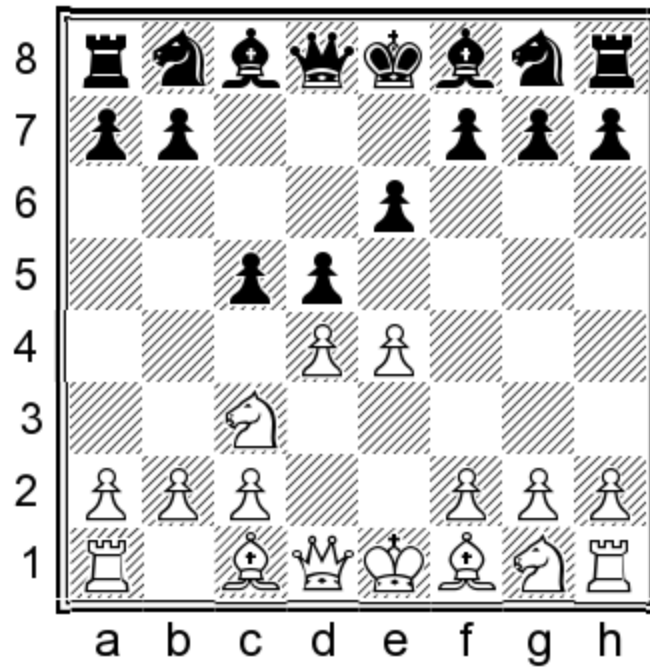
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3

- a) 3...c5?!
- b) 3...a6 4.Nf3
- c) 3...a6 4.Bd3
- d) 3...h6 4.Bd3 Bb4
- e) 3...h6 4.Bd3 Nc6
- f) 3...Be7

**a) 3...c5?!**



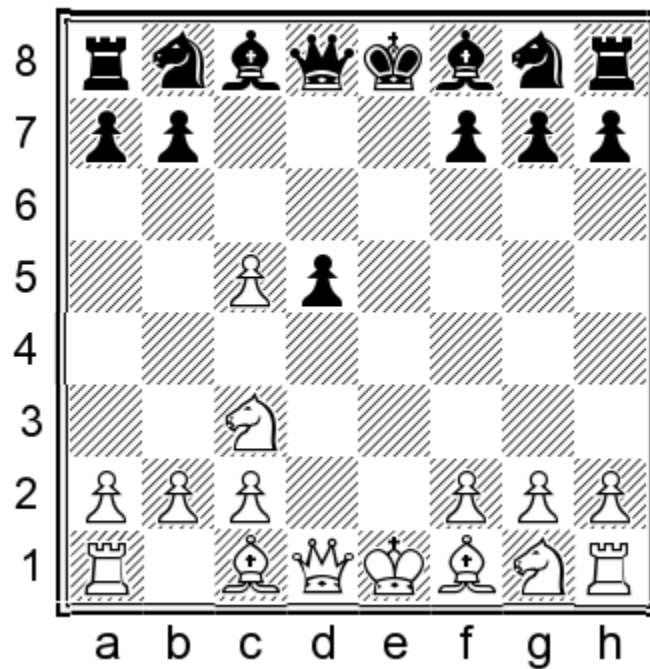
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 c5?!**



*Position after: 3...c5?!*

This move is the easiest one to refute. It is easier to know how to play against it than to face it over the board, but have no worries, it will not be a tough nut to crack. 3...c5 is a reputable line in the 3.Nd2 French, but with a knight on c3 Black's center is under too much pressure.

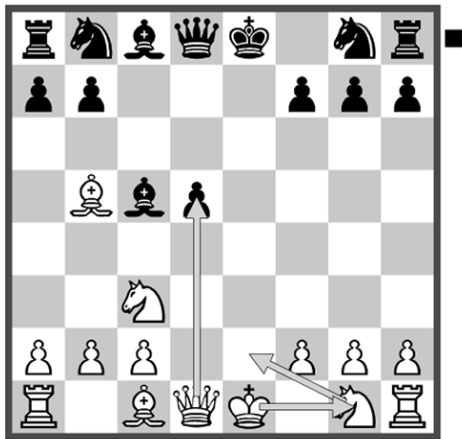
**4.exd5 exd5 5.dxc5**



*Position after: 5.dxc5*

## 5...Nf6

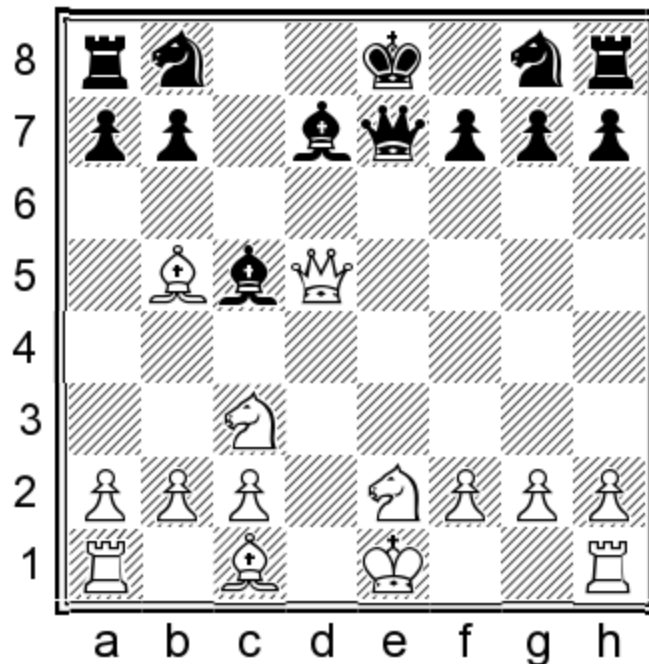
**A) 5...Bxc5 6.Bb5+** It is quite possible to take the d5-pawn immediately but White aims for swift development of their kingside and anticipates the move ...Qe7+. We will take the pawn on the very next move.



*Position after: 6.Bb5+*

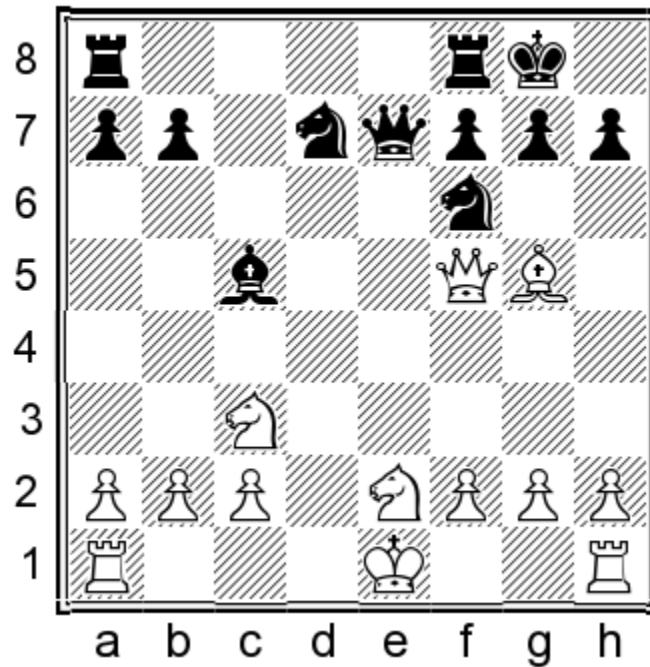
**A1)** 6...Nc6 7.Qxd5 is not rocket science really. We see a pawn, we grab a pawn. It's as simple as that. 7...Qxd5 [7...Qe7+ 8.Nge2±] 8.Nxd5±

**A2)** 6...Bd7 7.Qxd5 Qe7+ 8.Nge2



*Position after: 8.Nge2*

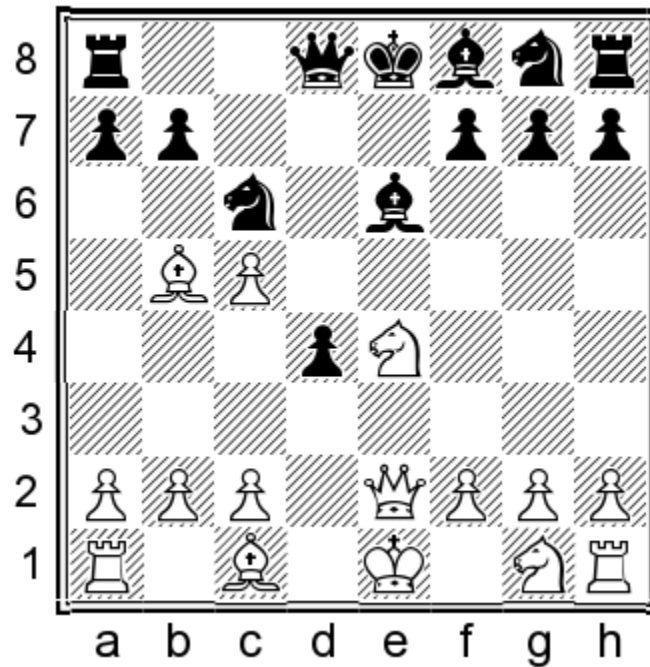
Had White's bishop still been on f1, their pieces would be a bit clumsily placed. Here Black can only delay the inevitable – eventually White will castle kingside and enjoy their full extra pawn advantage. 8...Bxb5 9.Nxb5 Nf6 10.Qf5 0-0 11.Bg5 Another important move; because of the positional threat of Bxf6 Black has to develop their queen's knight to d7 instead of the more active square c6. White needs just one move (Nc3) to be able to castle so they can afford one more developing move instead. 11...Nbd7 12.Nbc3±



*Position after: 12.Nbc3±*

White is a healthy pawn up and Black has no compensation here. It would be a bit different with a knight on c6 instead when Black would be able to speculate a bit with ...Nb4 so remember to force it to go to d7 with Bg5!

**B)** 5...d4 6.Bb5+ Nc6 7.Qe2+! It is important to include Qe2+ otherwise White would lose a piece to Qa5+. [7.Ne4? Qa5+-+] 7...Be6 8.Ne4

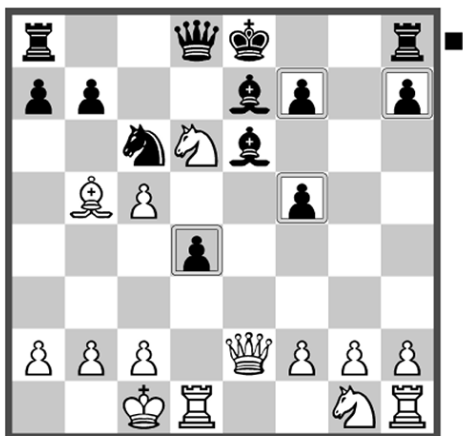


*Position after: 8.Ne4*

**B1)** 8...Qd5 9.Nh3!± White can play the normal-looking Nf3 too but it is even nicer to have a knight on f4, hitting both the Black queen and bishop. Especially as 9...Bxh3? 10.Nf6+ delivers a killer double check, and in fact mate in 3 as well.

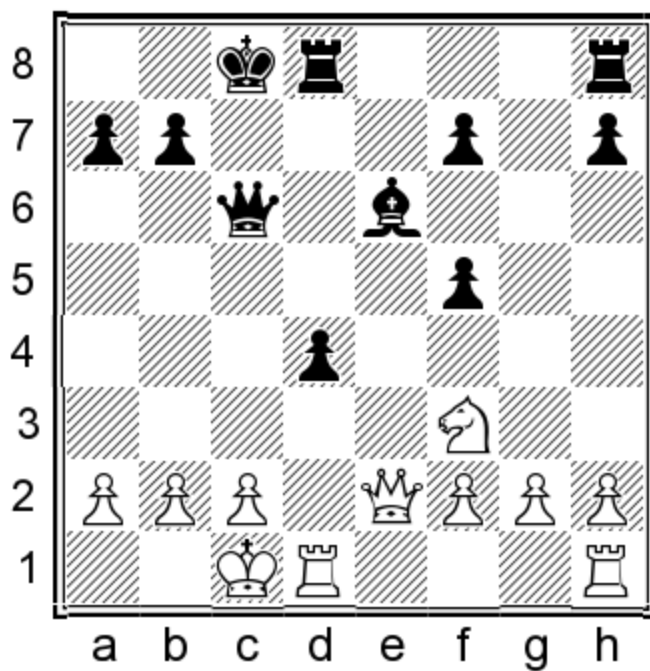
**B2)** 8...Nf6 9.Bg5 Black is somehow fishing for compensation but White's precise moves feel like hammering multiple nails into Black's coffin. 9...Be7 10.Bxf6 Black is faced with a sad choice. Do you allow the opponent's knight to d6, or cripple your pawns forever?

**B2.1)** 10...gxf6 11.0-0-0 f5 12.Nd6+!



*Position after: 12.Nd6+!*

It is quite usual to convert a positional advantage into a material one, but you should not be afraid of the reverse conversion as well. Black's position is in ruins even when the material is equal. 12...Bxd6 13.cxd6 Qxd6 14.Nf3 0-0-0 15.Bxc6 Qxc6



*Position after: 15...Qxc6*

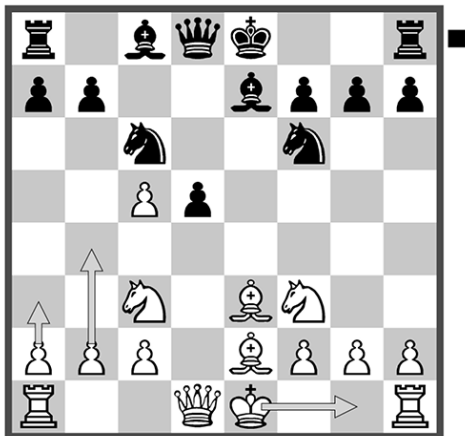
16.Rhe1± Taking on d4 is just a formality which will be finished very soon after which Black will have to struggle in a broken position being down on material. [The slightly more hasty 16.Nxd4 Qxg2 17.Nxe6 fxe6 18.Qxe6+ Kb8 19.Qe5+ Ka8 20.Qf4± with a clear extra pawn is also good for White.]

**B2.2)** 10...Bxf6 11.Nd6+ Kf8 12.Nf3± White is simply much better thanks to their extra pawn and the black king being stuck on f8. It will take Black some time to get their pieces coordinated at least a little bit, so finding decent compensation for the missing pawn is out of question.

## 6.Be3

We are keeping it simple as much as possible. White is holding onto their extra pawn and at the same time making good developing moves. Perfect.

**6...Nc6 7.Nf3 Be7 8.Be2±**

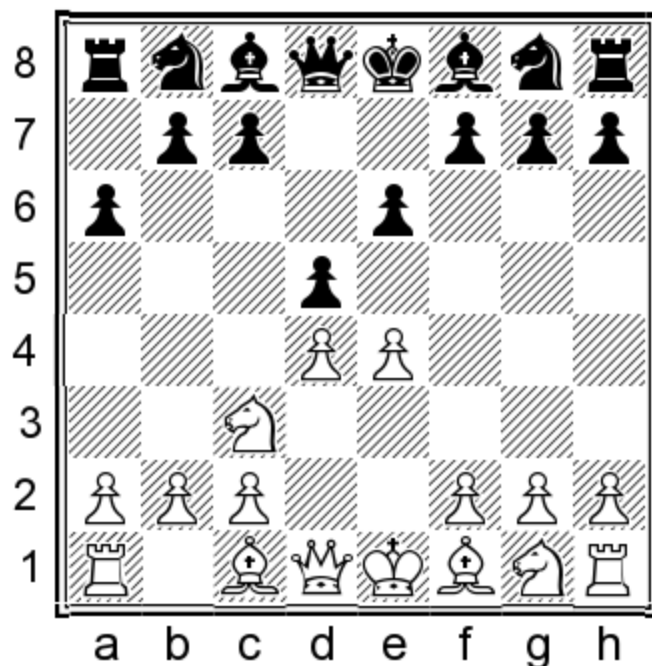


*Position after: 8.Be2±*

It is quite hard for Black to get to the c5-pawn as the d5-square needs protection too. After castling White can stabilize the pawn with a3-b4.

**b) 3...a6 4.Nf3**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 a6**



*Position after: 3...a6*

I never analyzed this move seriously until I faced it at the Olympiad in 2018. Black is trying to make a useful waiting move, but it is far from being the most principled system. In my own game I played...

**4.Nf3**

After analyzing this variation in depth, I found out that Black has some improvements.

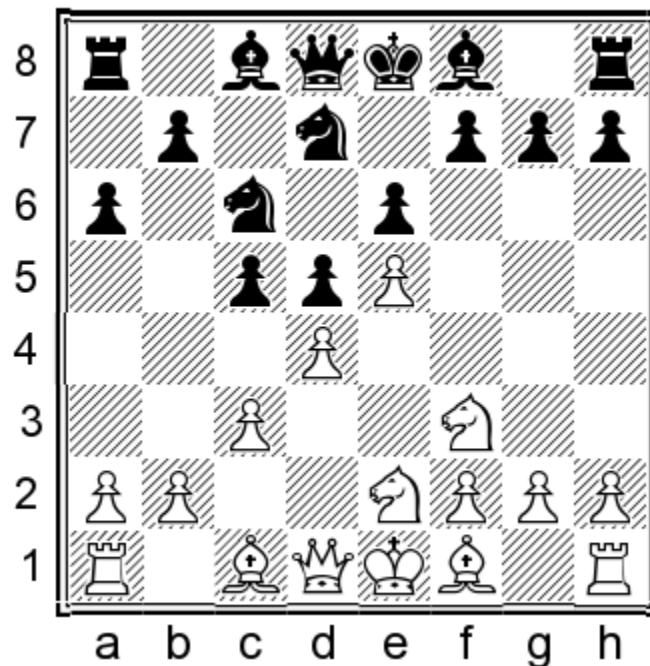


## 4...Nf6

4...Bb4 is inconsistent as 5.e5 c5 6.a3 Bxc3+ 7.bxc3 transposes into an improved version of Winawer variation where Black rarely plays ...a6 and it might prove to be simply a waste of time.

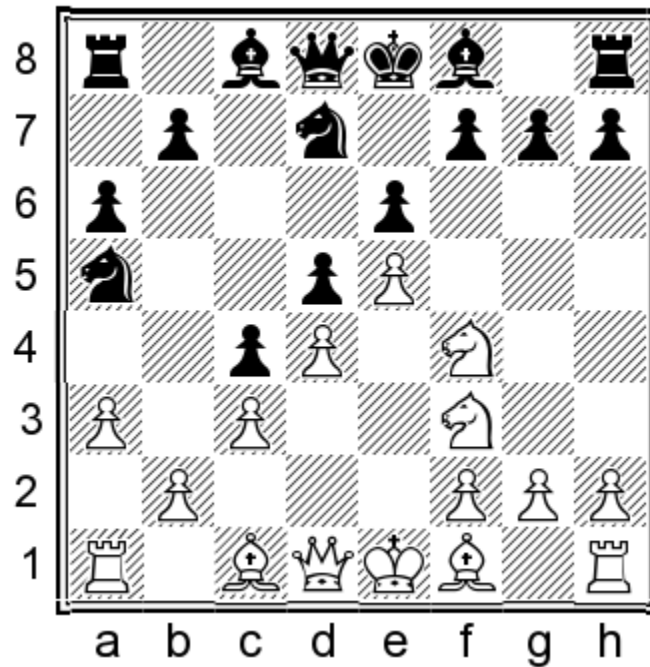
## 5.Bd3

5.e5 Nfd7 6.Ne2 c5 7.c3 Nc6



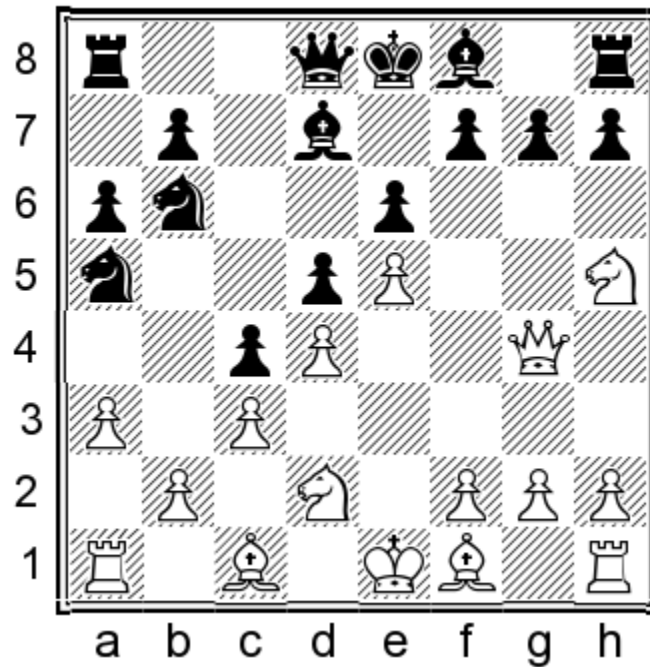
*Position after: 7...Nc6*

is a position in the spirit of Part IV and Black can actually reach it using the 3...Nf6 move order too. There are more troubling options than ...a6 in the 3...Nf6 system, but nevertheless I'd like to take a simpler approach after 3...a6. For example 8.a3 c4 9.Nf4 Na5



*Position after: 9...Na5*

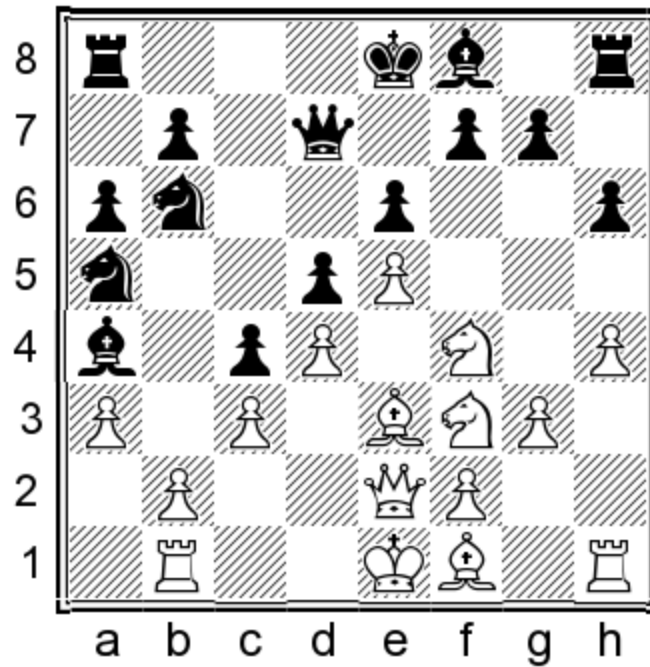
**A)** 10.Nd2 Black is trying to claim that losing time with ...a6 is not so important in a closed position. However, after White's last move Black is one tempo short. White is preparing a quick ambush of Black's kingside. 10...Nb6 11.Nh5 If Black closes the queenside after a3, ...c4, the best square for White's knight is clearly on h5. 11...Bd7 12.Qg4±



*Position after: 12.Qg4±*

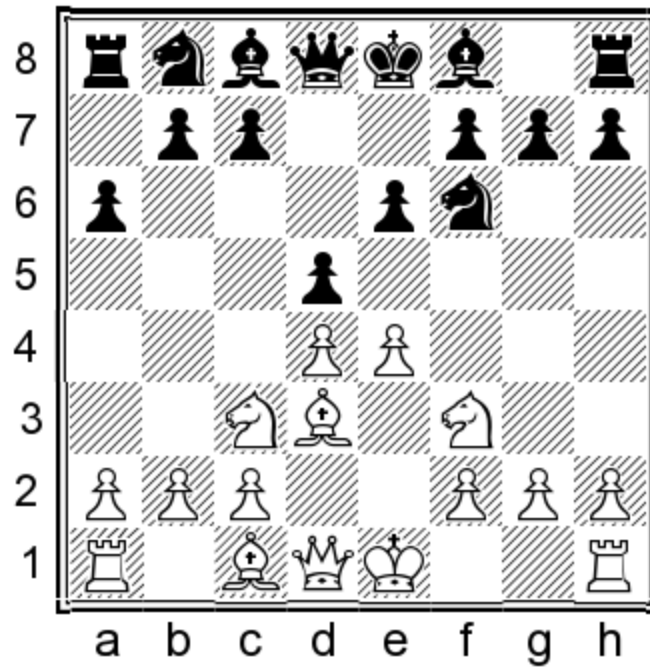
and the hit on g7 is extremely unpleasant as 12...Rg8 drops an exchange after 13.Nf6+!.

**B)** 10.Be3 would be nice to have in the main line too but now Black is just in time to develop the rest of their queenside. 10...Nb6 11.Nh5 [11.h4 Bd7 12.Rb1 Ba4 13.Qe2 h6 14.g3 Qd7



*Position after: 14...Qd7*

also looks normal for Black. It is quite good for Black that they omitted ...b5 as they were able to activate their light-squared bishop utilizing the a4-e8 diagonal.] 11...Bd7 12.Nd2 Qc7 13.Qg4 0-0-0 and 14.Nxg7? is just a blunder due to 14...Rg8.



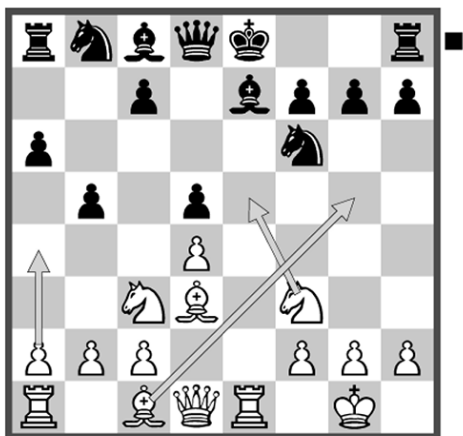
*Position after: 5.Bd3*

**5...c5!**

This move gives Black good counter-chances.

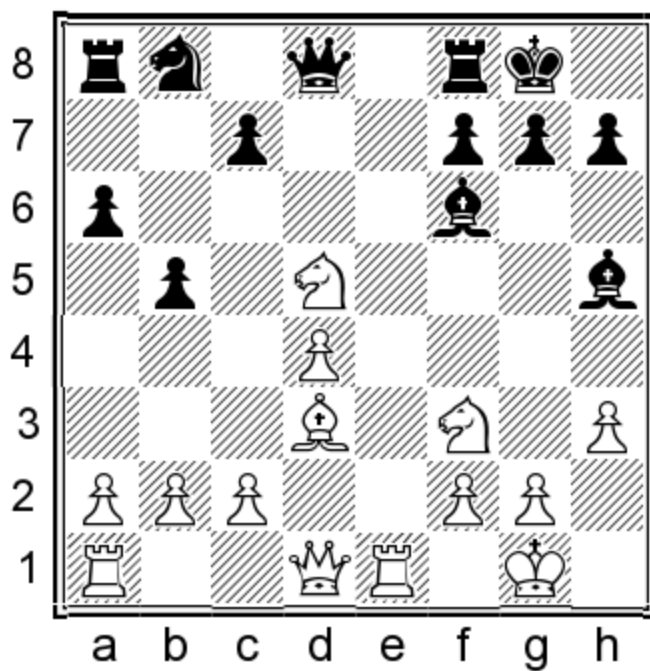
**A)** 5...b5 is too optimistic to be good. After 6.exd5 exd5 7.Bg5± White has a brilliant position and Black's pawn advances leave them with nothing more than weaknesses and underdevelopment.

**B)** 5...Be7 6.0-0 b5 is actually my game from the Olympiad. I played 7.exd5 exd5 8.Re1



*Position after: 8.Re1*

and won quite easily. Even though the position is symmetrical, Black is already doing rather badly as they are many tempi down due to their reckless play on the queenside. White has many natural moves like Ne5, Bg5 or a4. The game went 8...0-0 9.Bg5 Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 and now the clever combination 11.Bxf6 Bxf6 12.Nxd5!

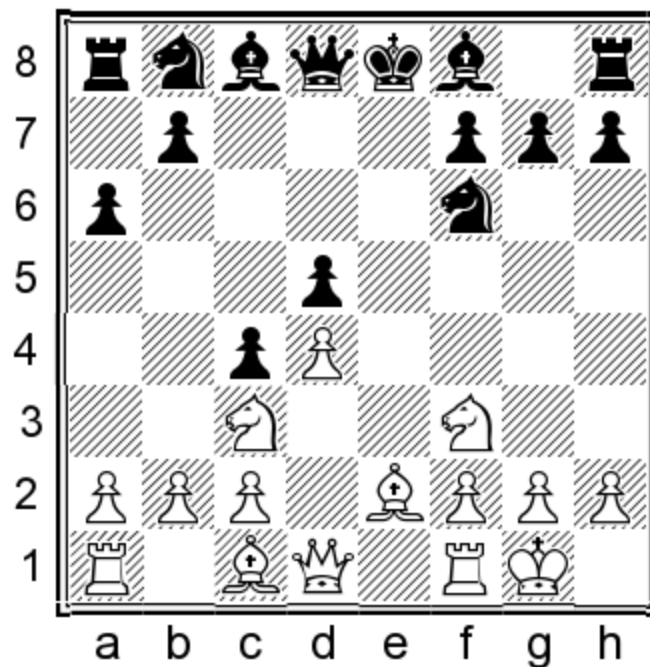


*Position after: 12.Nxd5!*

highlighted the drawbacks of ...a6, and ...b5. 12...Qxd5  
13.Be4+- 6.exd5

6.Bg5 c4 7.Be2 Be7 8.e5 Nfd7 9.Bxe7 Qxe7 looks reasonably okay for Black. If White could blast open the queenside blockade with 10.b3 b5 11.a4 then there would be some advantage for them but Black can keep the position closed with 11...b4 12.Na2 c3 and White's knight on a2 looks rather silly. Here ...a6 proved to be a useful move as it was essential to keep the blockade.

**6...exd5 7.0-0 c4 8.Be2**

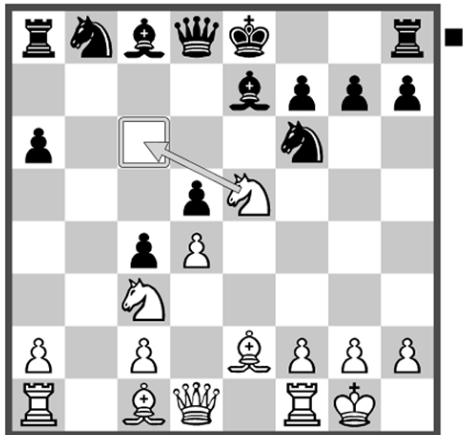


*Position after: 8.Be2*

**8...Bb4!**

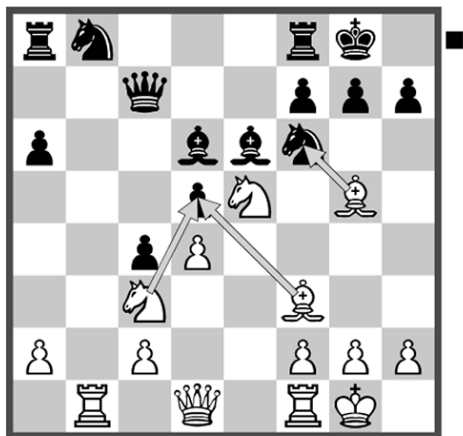
8...Be7 is imprecise and White is able to keep a small plus.  
9.b3

**A) 9...b5?! 10.bxc4 bxc4 11.Ne5**



*Position after: 11.Ne5*

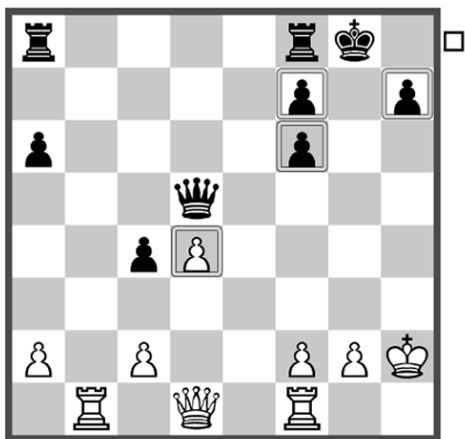
is also not great for Black. The knight on e5 is quite annoying and Black has to resort to some pretty artificial maneuvers in order to get rid of it. 11...0-0 12.Rb1 Qc7 [Black would very much like to play 12...Nbd7 immediately but White has 13.Nc6 Qe8 14.Bf3 and Black's position is just about to fall apart.] 13.Bf4 Bd6 14.Bf3 Be6 15.Bg5!



*Position after: 15.Bg5!*



White is indirectly putting even more pressure on the d5-pawn and Black will be unable to keep things under control anymore. 15...Nbd7 [15...Bxe5 loses a pawn for no compensation 16.dxe5 Qxe5 17.Bxf6 Qxf6 18.Nxd5 Bxd5 19.Qxd5 Ra7 20.Qxc4±] 16.Nxd7 Qxd7 17.Bxf6 gxf6 Black's pawn formation is ruined and White can immediately steer the game into a clearly favorable endgame with 18.Nxd5 Bxd5 19.Bxd5 Bxh2+ 20.Kxh2 Qxd5



*Position after: 20...Qxd5*

where the passed d4-pawn and broken black kingside give them a long-term advantage.

**B)** 9...cxb3 10.axb3 0-0 11.Ne5<sup>2</sup> is also nice for White.

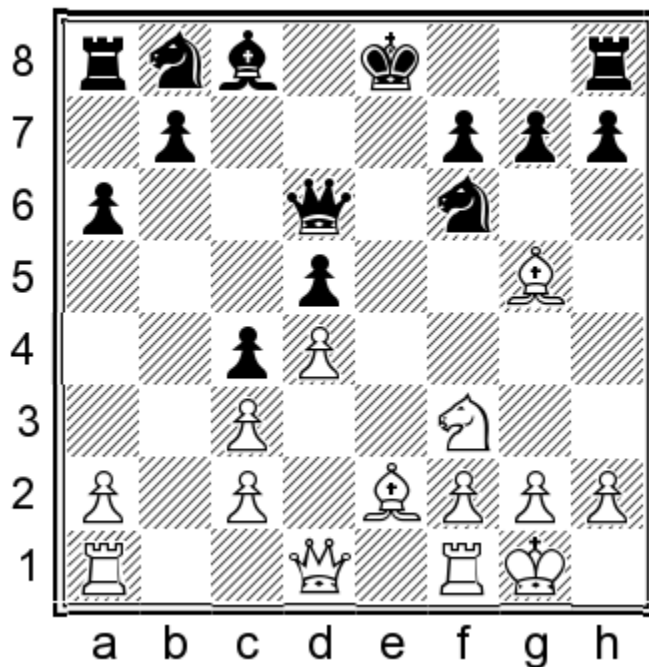
Their pawn structure is more compact and the d5-pawn is a weakness that will need constant care.

**C)** 9...Bb4 10.Bd2 cxb3 11.axb3 0-0 12.Na4 Bxd2 13.Qxd2<sup>2</sup> is very similar to the 9...cxb3 line and the same observations apply here too. Black's isolated pawn on d5 will be a constant source of trouble for them.

## 9.Bg5

Moving to d2 would be quite passive so White at least hopes to take the bishop pair.

**9...Bxc3 10.bxc3 Qd6∞**

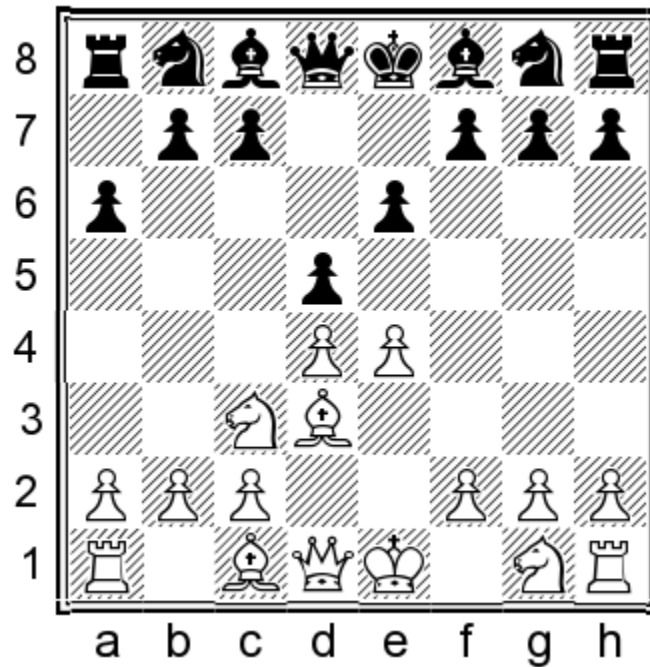


*Position after: 10...Qd6∞*

This position is similar to the positions arising in the Winawer variation. White's e5-pawn and Black's e6-pawn are not present here which makes it easier for Black to develop pieces. Note that thanks to the presence of a Black pawn on c4 the mobility of the bishop on e2 is quite restricted.

**c) 3...a6 4.Bd3**

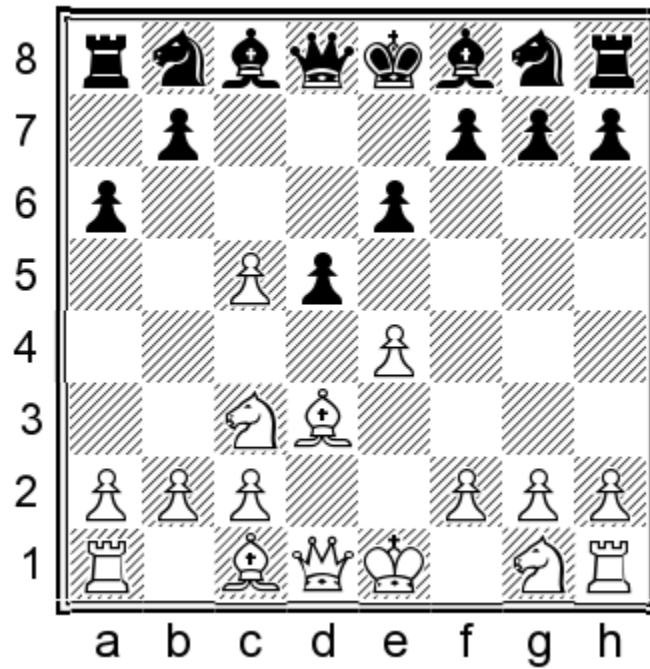
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 a6 4.Bd3**



*Position after: 4.Bd3*

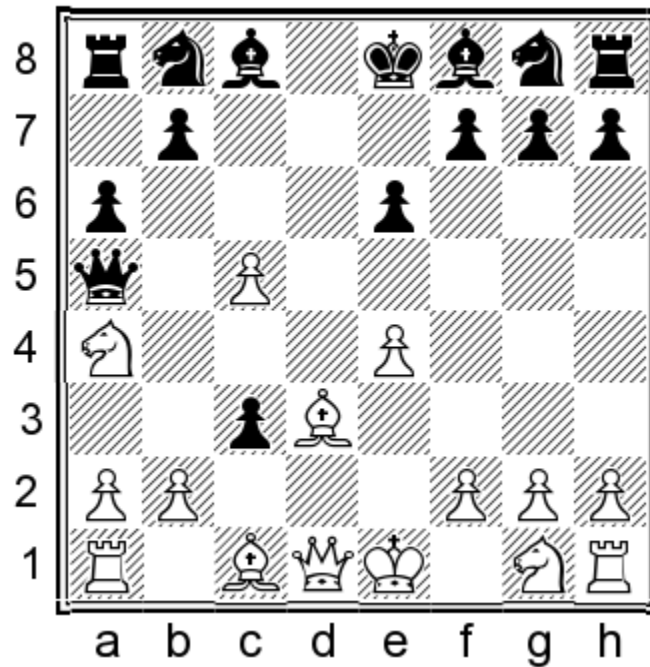
#### **4...Bb4**

**A)** 4...c5 is not much more attractive here than it was one move earlier. We force matters with 5.dxc5 [5.Nf3 is the line which is problematic for White from the 4.Nf3 move order; 5.exd5 runs into the zwischenzug 5...cxd4]



*Position after: 5.dxc5*

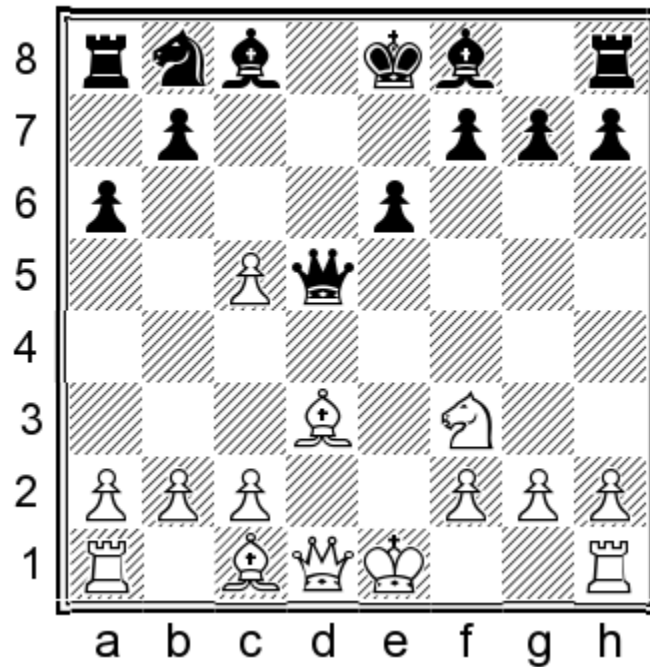
**A1)** 5...d4 6.Na4 is one level of greediness above what we saw in the 3...c5 variation. But it works very well thanks to the weakness of the b6-square. 6...Qa5+ 7.c3 dxc3



*Position after: 7...dxc3*

8.b4! (sacrificing the b2-pawn so that there would be no ...cxb2+) [8.Nb6? cxb2+ 9.Bd2 bxa1=Q-+ would be awkward.] 8...Qxb4 9.Nb6+- and Black is losing at least a piece.

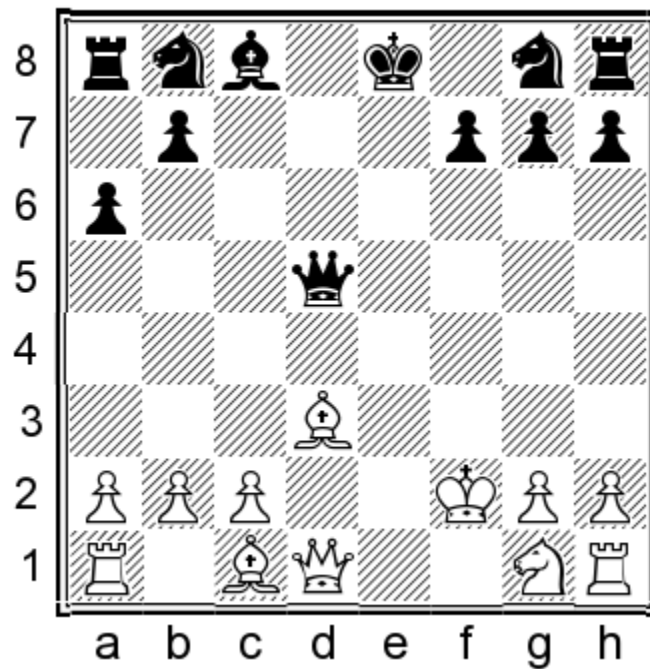
**A2)** 5...Nf6 6.exd5 Nxd5 7.Nxd5 Qxd5 8.Nf3



*Position after: 8.Nf3*

It might not look like much for White but in reality it is not so easy for Black to develop in this position as the bishop on c8 is stuck. 8...Bxc5 9.0-0 0-0 10.Bf4 f6 11.Qe2 Also Black's queen will be struggling to find a decent square as it can be easily attacked on d5. 11...Qh5 12.Be4 The queen is not a great sight on h5 and Black's struggle to develop their queenside goes on.

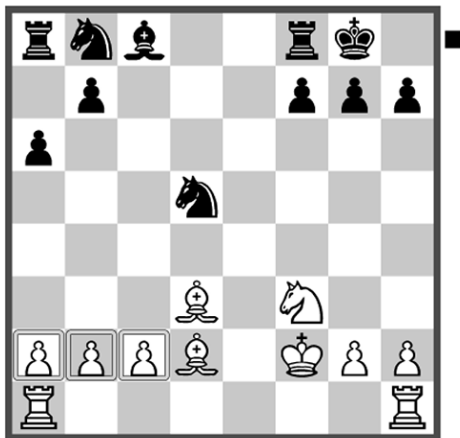
**A3)** 5...Bxc5 6.exd5 exd5 7.Nxd5! Bxf2+ Black has to take the sting out of the Bb5 check. [7...Qxd5? drops a queen to a discovered attack 8.Bb5++-] 8.Kxf2 Qxd5



*Position after: 8...Qxd5*

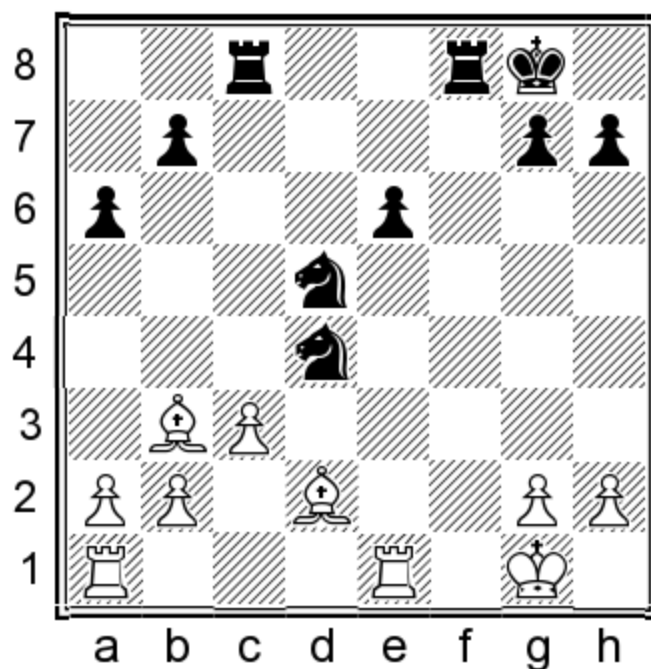
White's position is better here due to their two bishops + development advantage. Readers can choose from three options which I have given here based on their taste.

**A3.1)** 9.Qf3 steers the game into a favorable ending.  
9...Nf6 10.Qxd5 Nxd5 11.Nf3 0-0 12.Bd2



*Position after: 12.Bd2*

White's bishop pair is pretty strong here as the position is relatively open and play takes place on both wings (a pair of knights are unable to maneuver quickly from one side to another). Another thing going for White is the fact that the pawn structure is imbalanced and it is usually easier to create a passed pawn with a queenside majority than the other way around. 12...Nc6 13.Rhe1 Ncb4 Trying to shake White's set-up up a bit, but to no avail. 14.Bc4 Be6 15.Nd4 Rac8 16.Bb3 Nc6 17.Nxe6 fxe6+ 18.Kg1 Nd4 19.c3



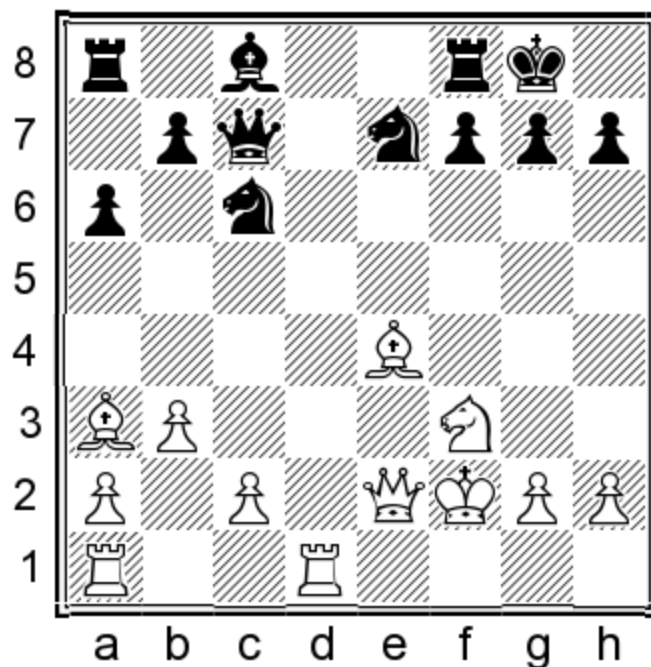
*Position after: 19.c3*

Sometimes it is half-jokingly said that the biggest advantage of a bishop pair is that at the right time one of the bishops can be favorably exchanged. It certainly applies here as White is happy to trade their bishop-pair edge for a weakness on e6. 19...Nxb3 20.axb3<sup>2</sup> Here, e6 is indeed quite weak and Black's powerful horse on d5 is



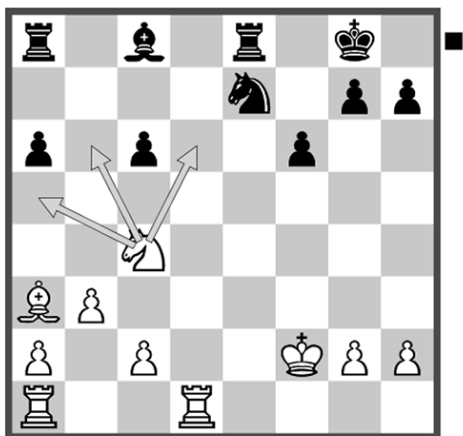
only temporary as the knight can be expelled with c3-c4 at any time.

**A3.2)** 9.Qe2+ intends to play with queens on for a bit longer. 9...Ne7 10.Nf3 Nbc6 11.Be4 Qd6 12.Rd1 Qc7 13.b3 0-0 14.Ba3



*Position after: 14.Ba3*

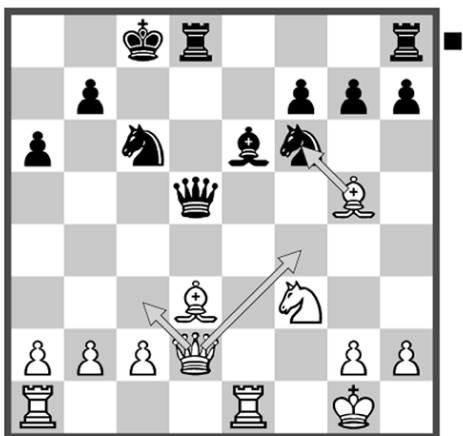
White managed to gain some time attacking the black queen and now it is once again time to transform their advantage. 14...Re8 15.Bxc6 Black has to let White damage their pawn structure. With such gains White is once again happy to simplify. 15...bxc6 16.Qe5 Qxe5 17.Nxe5 f6 18.Nc4<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 18.Nc4<sup>2</sup>*

White has many ways of attacking the weaknesses on Black's queenside. They have the a5, b6 and d6 squares for the knight and Black has to both solve the issue of defending their position and developing the rest of their queenside.

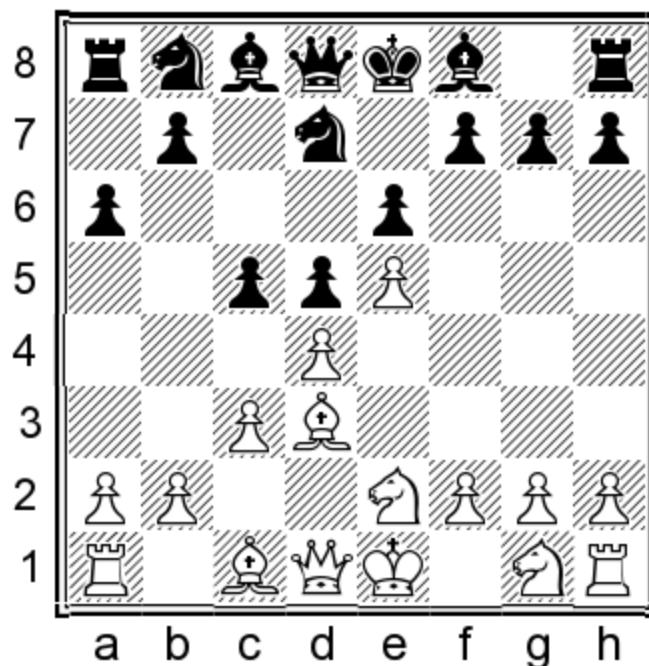
**A3.3)** 9.Nf3 White can opt for playing a middlegame with queens too. 9...Nf6 10.Re1+ Be6 11.Kg1 White castles by hand. 11...Nc6 12.Bg5 0-0-0 13.Qd2<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 13.Qd2<sup>2</sup>*

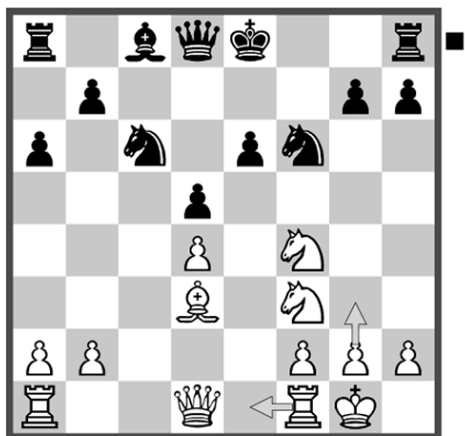
White is ready to trade one of their bishops for permanent damage to Black's kingside, then they can continue with either Qc3 or Qf4, targeting the new weakness on f6.

**B)** 4...Nf6 gives White an ideal set-up after 5.e5 Nfd7 6.Nce2 c5 7.c3



*Position after: 7.c3*

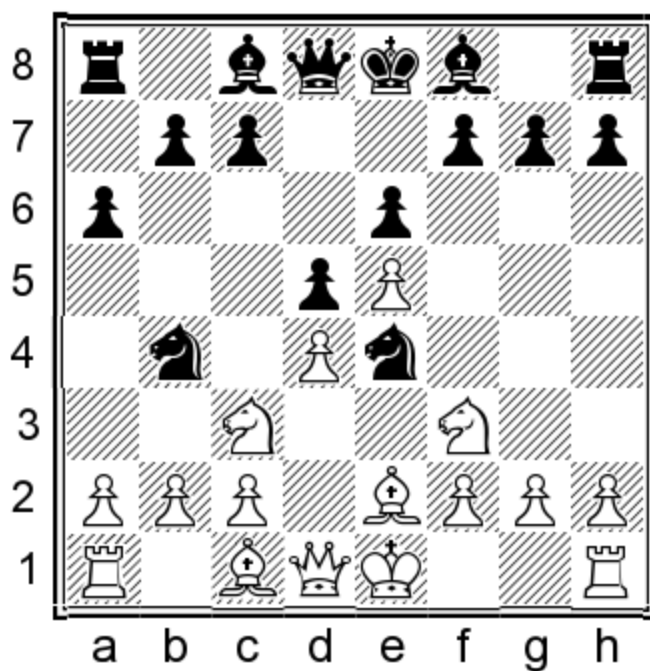
It is a rare sight for White to get Bd3, Nce2, and c3 in. Black can try to loosen the central grip a bit with 7...Nc6 8.Nf3 cxd4 9.cxd4 f6 but White has a nice game. The ...a6 move is of little value here. 10.exf6 Nxf6 11.0-0 Bd6 12.Bf4 Bxf4 13.Nxf4±



*Position after: 13.Nxf4±*

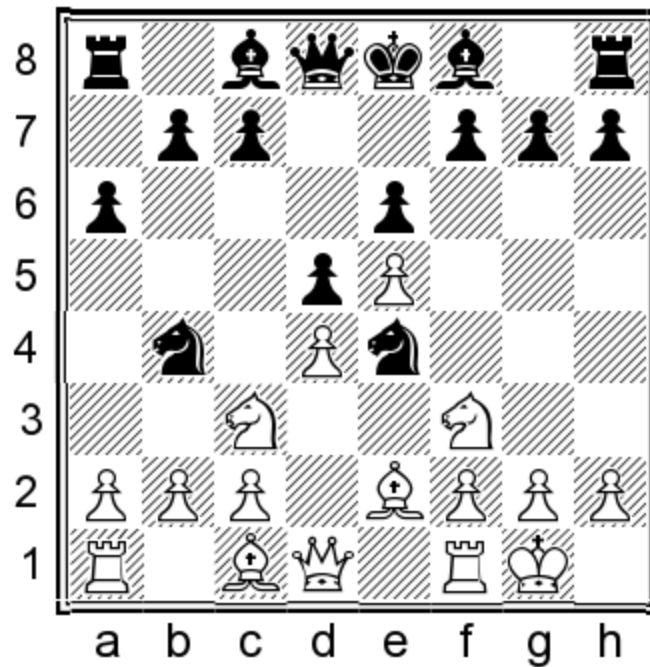
White will ensure the position of their knight on f4 with g2-g3 and then continue to build up pressure against the e6-pawn with Re1. Their position is a pleasure to play.

**C)** 4...Nc6 5.Nf3 is also nothing special for Black. After 5...Nb4 White should keep the bishop pair with 6.Be2 and after 6...Nf6 push the pawn. 7.e5 Ne4



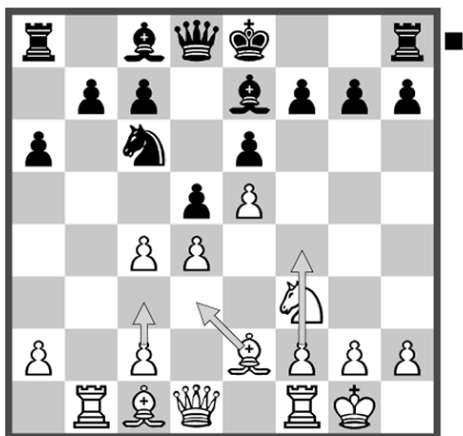
*Position after: 7...Ne4*

The black knight looks nice on e4 but unfortunately for Black it will not live long. 8.0-0 [8.Nxe4? dxe4 9.Ng5 Qxd4! is just about the only trick you need to watch out for. The point is 10.Qxd4 Nxc2+-- regaining the material with interest.]



*Position after: 8.0-0*

**C1)** 8...Nxc3 9.bxc3 Nc6 10.c4! immediately removes the doubled pawns. 10...Be7 11.Rb1<sup>2</sup>

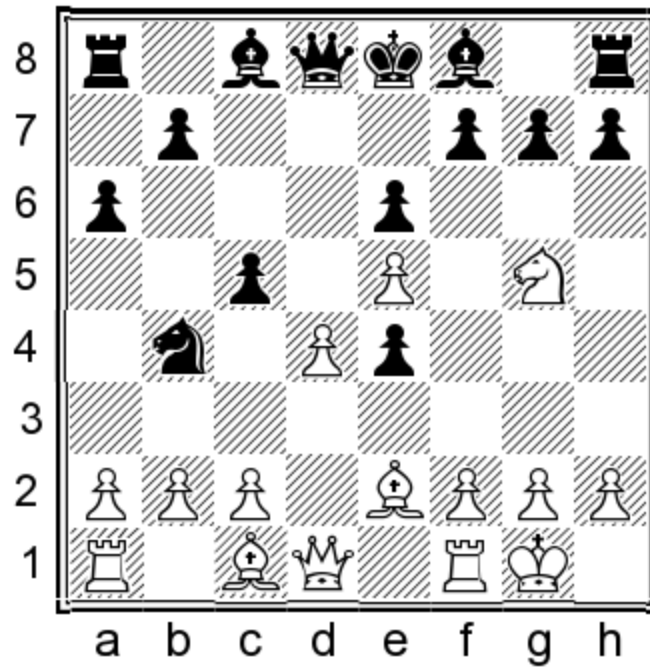


*Position after: 11.Rb1<sup>2</sup>*

Rb1 is preventing smooth development of Black's queenside. White can continue with c3, Bd3, Qc2, and at a suitable moment they can even prepare a kingside pawn storm with f2-f4 (possibly after taking on d5). In any case it is no fun for Black to play this position.

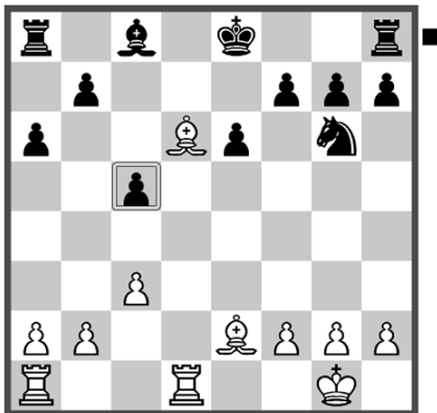
**C2)** The e4-square is already in danger after castling as 8...Be7 9.Nxe4 dxe4 10.Nd2 Qxd4 runs into 11.c3+-.

**C3)** 8...c5 9.Nxe4 dxe4 10.Ng5



*Position after: 10.Ng5*

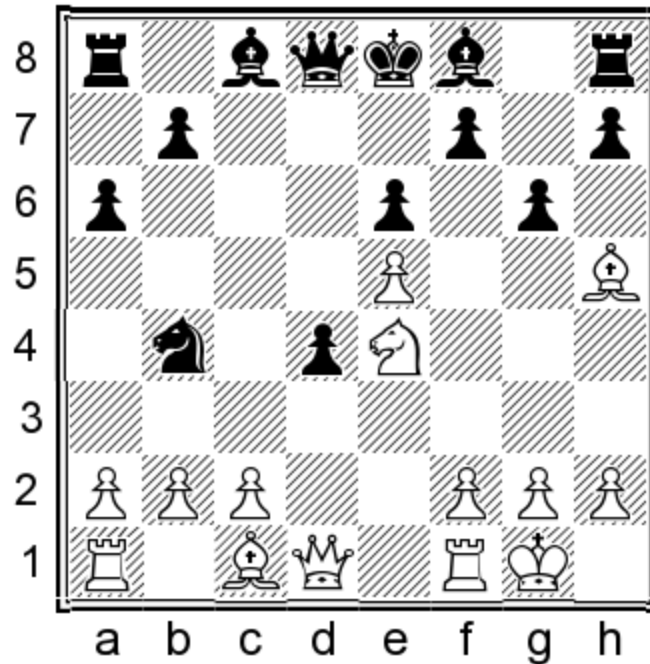
**C3.1)** 10...Qxd4 11.c3 Qxd1 12.Rxd1 allows White to eventually stabilize the position in a much better endgame. 12...Nd3 13.Nxe4 Nxe5 [13...Nxc1 14.Raxc1 Bd7 15.Bf3 with Nd6 to follow is also unpleasant for Black. 15...Bc6 16.Nd6+ Bxd6 17.Bxc6+ bxc6 18.Rxd6±] 14.Bf4 Ng6 15.Nd6+ Bxd6 16.Bxd6 and Black has to give one pawn back and suffer against White's bishop pair as



*Position after: 16.Bxd6*

16...b6 loses material to 17.Bf3 Ra7 18.Bc6+ Bd7  
19.Bb8+-.

**C3.2)** 10...cxd4 Here you should remember just one nice  
point 11.Bh5! g6 12.Nxe4±

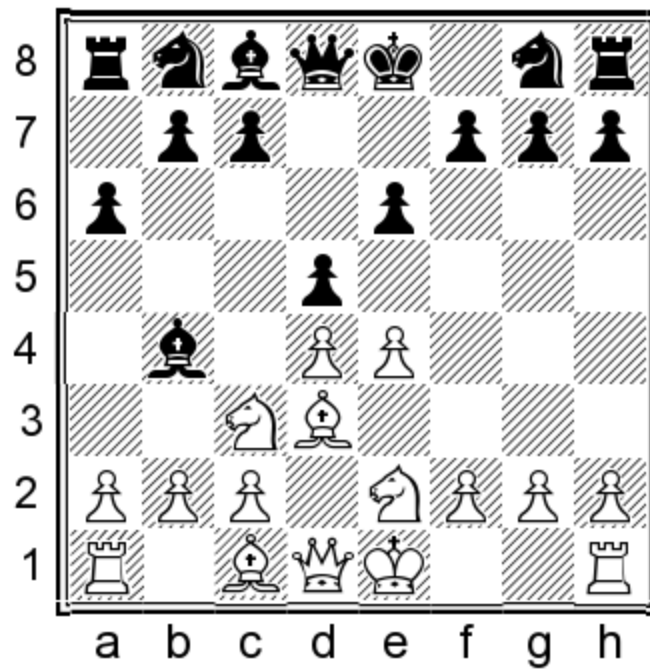


*Position after: 12.Nxe4±*

White was able to provoke a serious weakening of the kingside as 12...gxh5 13.Nf6+ Ke7 14.Bg5 just wins for White. There is only one square from which the black queen can escape discovered attacks and after 14...Qa5 15.Qxd4 there is no good defense against Qd6.

**5.Nge2**



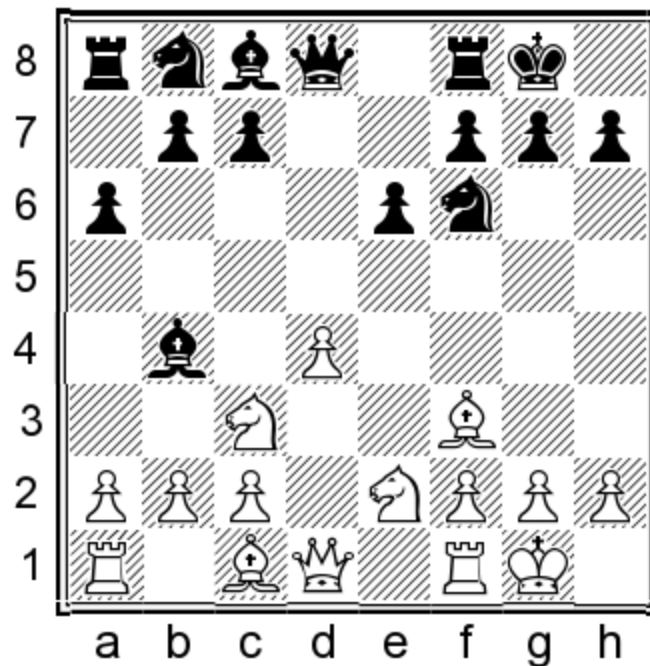


*Position after: 5.Nge2*

### **5...dxe4**

5...c5 is once again not a great move because of 6.exd5 cxd4 7.Nxd4 Qxd5 8.0-0. The knight on d4 is taboo because of Bb5+ and otherwise Black has to either lose more time with their queen or part with the bishop pair after 8...Bxc3 9.bxc3. However, that would leave White with a clearly superior position as now their bishop has a perfect square on a3.

### **6.Bxe4 Nf6 7.Bf3 0-0 8.0-0<sup>2</sup>**



*Position after: 8.0-0<sup>2</sup>*

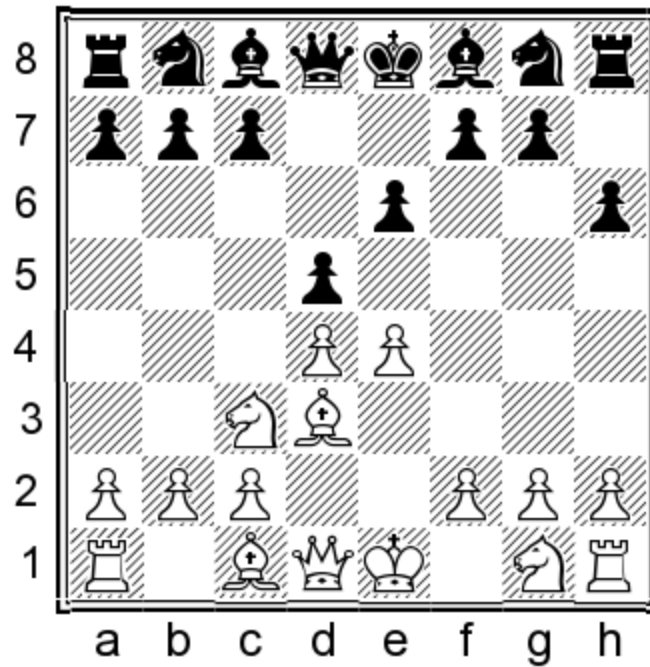
These positions are quite similar to those discussed in the Rubinstein (3...dxe4) variation. However it is far from clear how the moves ...a6 and ...Bb4 benefit Black whereas White enjoys their unchallenged spatial advantage.

**d) 3...h6 4.Bd3 Bb4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 h6**

This move has goals similar to those of 3...a6. Black is arguing that they can make a waiting move and adjust their set-up according to White's reaction. Our choice remains the same.

**4.Bd3**

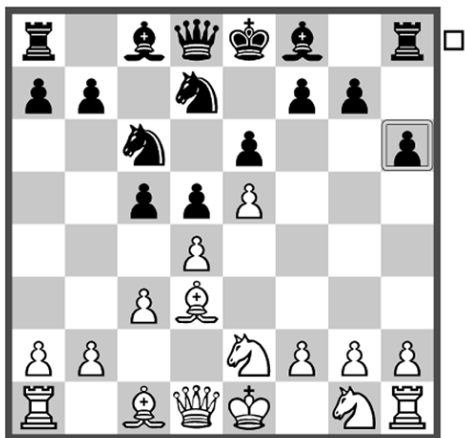


*Position after: 4.Bd3*

#### **4...Bb4**

White has to pay a bit of attention here as they cannot play in the same fashion as in the Winawer variation.

However, after 4...Nf6?! 5.e5 Nfd7 6.Nce2 c5 7.c3 Nc6



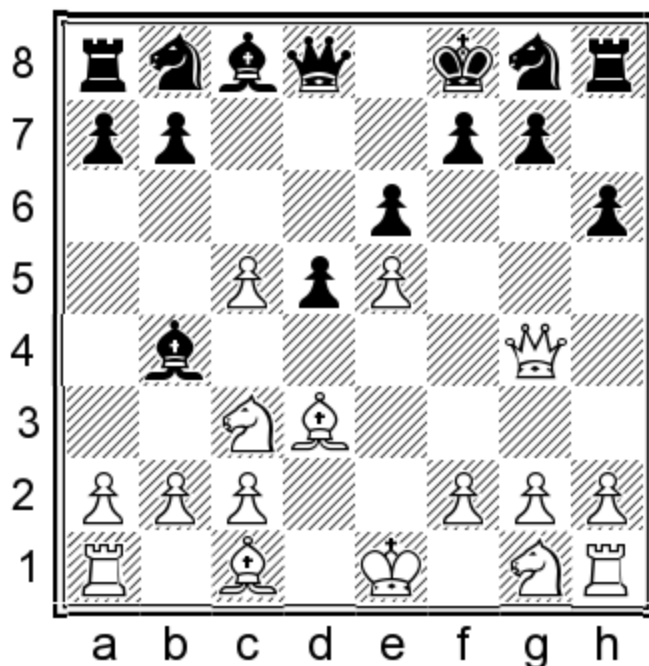
*Position after: 7...Nc6*

Black's position is even worse here than in the line with 3...a6. Black can only dream of playing ...f6 with the g6-square weakened so severely, so the set-up with Nf3 is definitely the first thing that comes to mind. But because ...h6 weakens the kingside 8.f4 is too tempting not to be played. 8...cxd4 9.cxd4 Bb4+ 10.Bd2<sup>2</sup> White will proceed with Nf3 and it is only a matter of time before they strike with f4-f5.

### 5.e5 c5 6.Qg4

6.a3 is the Winawer treatment that is a bit innocuous here. Black has 6...Bxc3+ 7.bxc3 c4<sup>∞</sup> and White has to lose a tempo with their bishop.

### 6...Kf8 7.dxc5



*Position after: 7.dxc5*

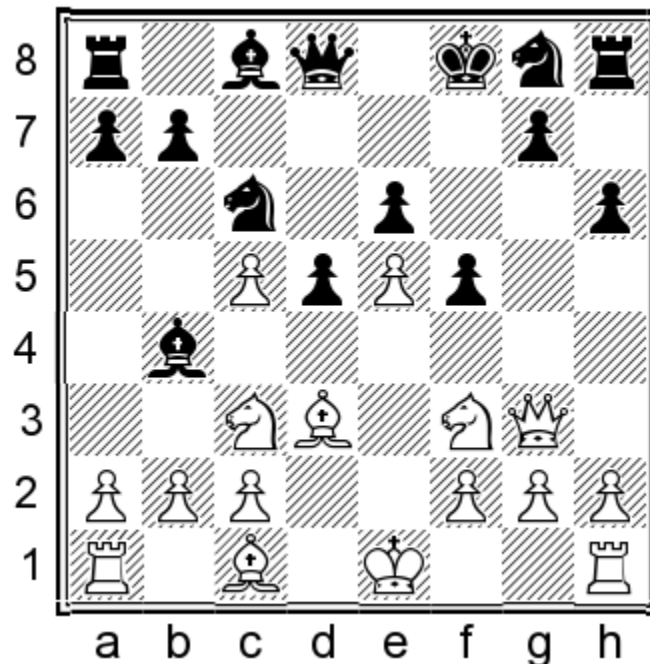
It is quite hard for Black to justify the move ...h6.

### 7...Nc6 8.Nf3 f5

Understandably trying to get some space to breathe.

8...Bxc5 9.0-0 Nb4 10.Be3 White can exchange their d3-bishop here due to the fact that it opens the c-file and if Black swaps on e3 then White can more easily launch an attack on Black's king.

### 9.Qg3

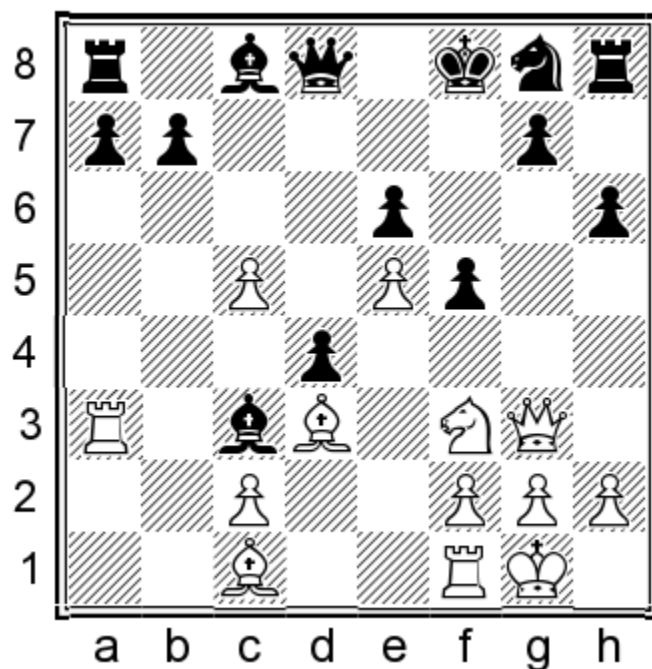


*Position after: 9.Qg3*

### 9...g5

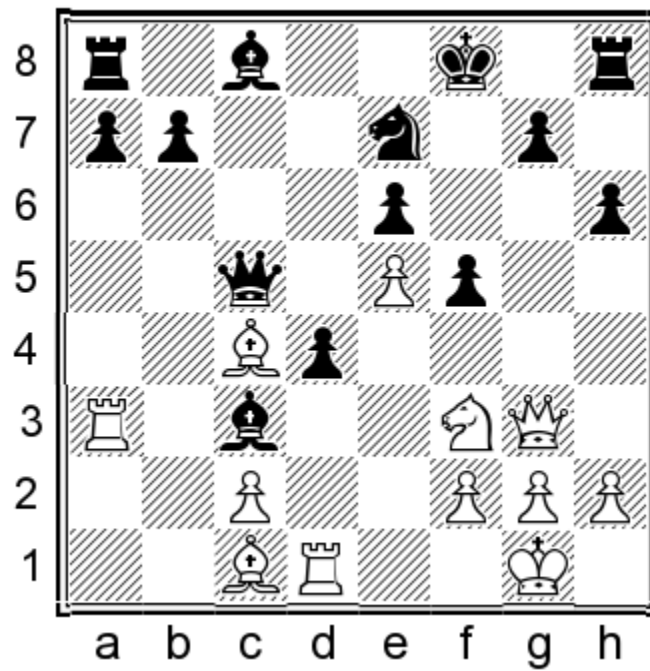
9...d4 Complicating matters when your king is badly placed is generally not such a great idea and it is not a good one in this position either. 10.a3 Ba5 11.b4 Nxb4 12.axb4 Bxb4

White had to sacrifice two pawns in order not to lose a piece. However we are happy to feed our opponent some irrelevant material for the sake of quick development and activity. 13.0-0 Bxc3 14.Ra3



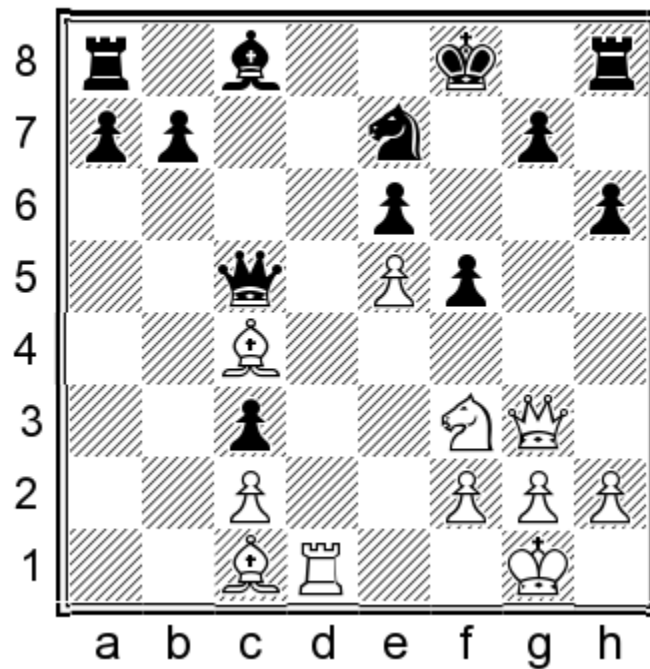
*Position after: 14.Ra3*

**A)** 14...Ne7 15.Bc4 Black has pretty serious weaknesses on d4 and e6. Therefore White has no issues with playing it slow either. 15...Qc7 [The black queen would have to budge anyway, e.g. 15...Nc6 16.Rd1 and White has the threat of Rxc3.] 16.Rd1 Qxc5



*Position after: 16...Qxc5*

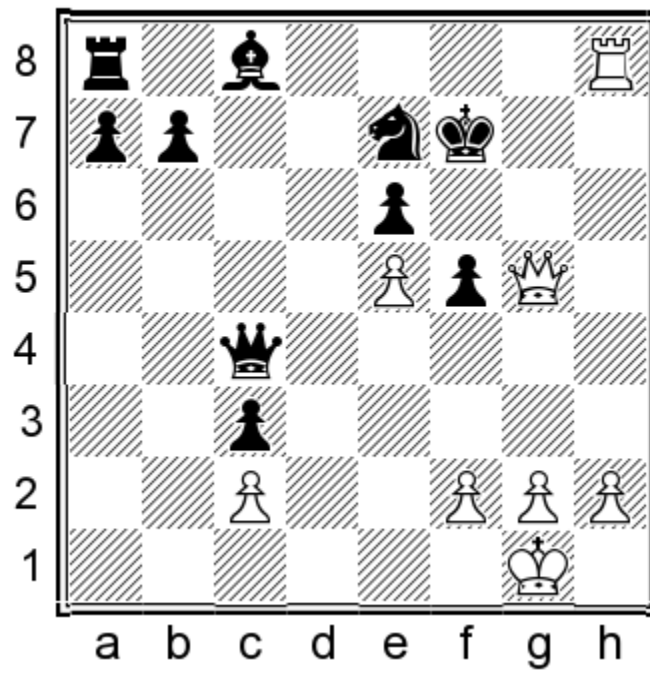
And now it is time to go for the brilliancy prize. 17.Rxc3!!  
 White's rook penetrates the 8th rank with decisive effect.  
 17...dxc3



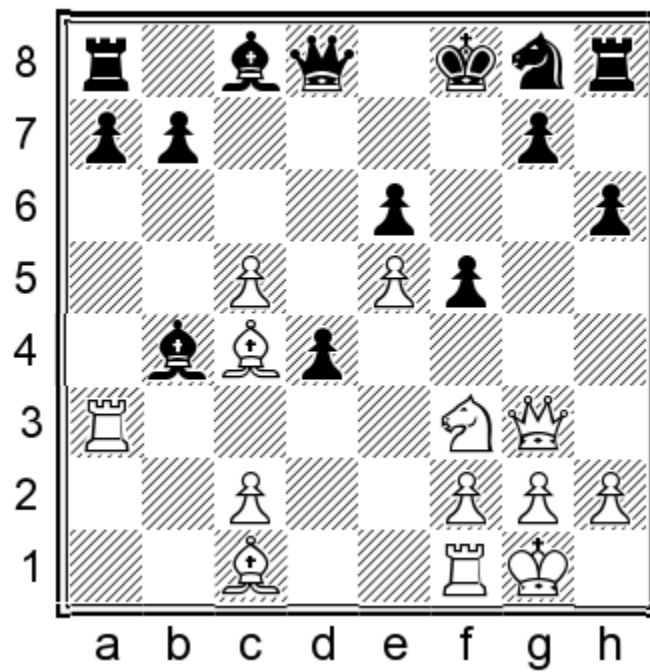
*Position after: 17...dxc3*

18.Bxh6! I like this move even more although White can win with the prosaic Rd8+ too. [18.Rd8+ Kf7 19.Rxh8 Qxc4 20.h3!+- Stopping Qg4. Black is busted anyway as there is no good defense against Bxh6. Black's pieces on the queenside are mere spectators when it comes to the defense of their kingside.] 18...gxh6 [18...Rxh6 just leads to a quicker mate. 19.Rd8+ Kf7 20.Ng5+ Kg6 21.Nxe6++-] 19.Rd8+ Kf7 20.Rxh8 Qxc4 21.Ng5+!! hxg5 22.Qxg5+- and there is not much Black can do against Qf6 mate. A picturesque position!





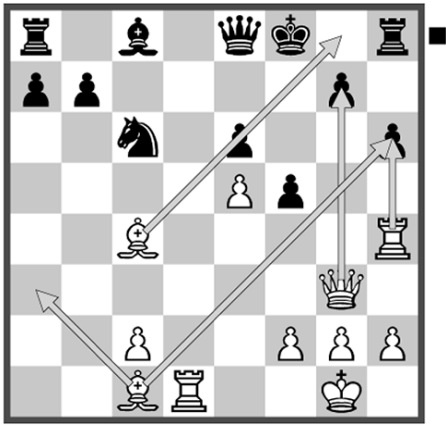
*Position after: 22.Qxg5+- **B)** 14...Bb4 15.Bc4!*



*Position after: 15.Bc4!*

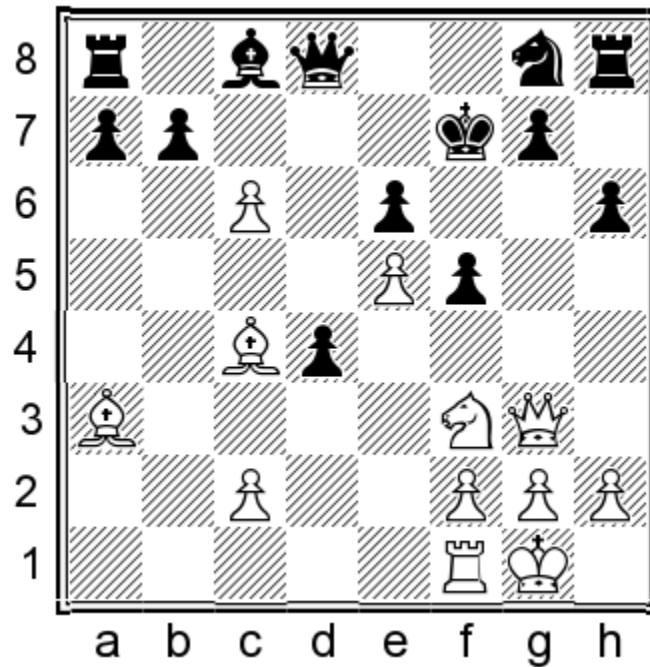
White most likely keeps the upper hand after other moves too but this is the most unpleasant one.

**B1)** Besides moral obligations (if you have to suffer, then at least suffer with a full belly) Black should take the rook so that it does not come to d3. 15...Ne7 16.Rd3 Bxc5 17.Rfd1 Nc6 [Letting the rook get to d4 is even worse as it is able to join the onslaught on the kingside. 17...Qe8 18.Nxd4 Bxd4 19.Rxd4 Nc6 20.Rh4+-



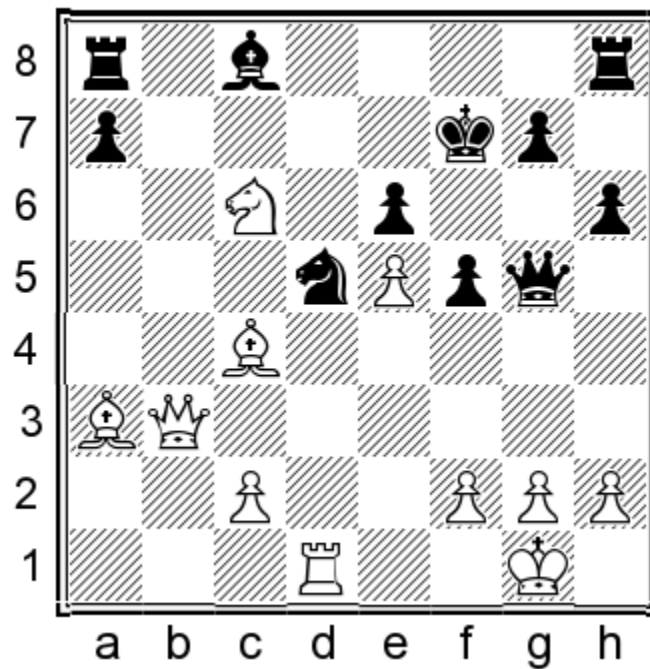
*Position after: 20.Rh4+- There is no way Black can survive when the whole white army targets their king.] 18.c3±*

**B2)** 15...Bxa3 16.Bxa3 Kf7 17.c6!



*Position after: 17.c6!*

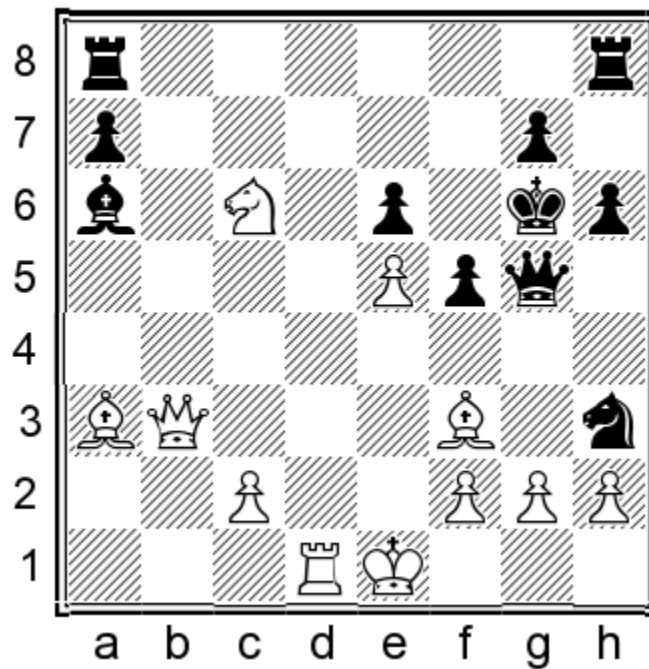
The pawn push comes either way, with a check or without it. The most important thing is to open the position as much as possible. 17...bxc6 18.Rd1 Ne7 19.Nxd4 Besides their obvious activity the white pieces generate a lot of attacking potential as well. White threatens to capture on e7 when the f5-pawn would be in grave danger. 19...Nd5 Stops any Nxf5 ideas, but the knight is far from being stable on d5. 20.Nxc6 Qg5 21.Qb3



*Position after: 21.Qb3*

Of course you should not exchange queens when you are attacking the enemy king!

**B2.1)** 21...Kg6 22.Be2! Firstly, the bishop makes way for the c-pawn, which will drive away the d5-knight. Secondly, it takes the sting out of any ... Nf4 ideas, trying to checkmate on g2. 22...Nf4 Trying to muddy the waters - otherwise c4 comes. 23.Bf3 Nh3+ 24.Kf1 Ba6+ 25.Ke1!!±

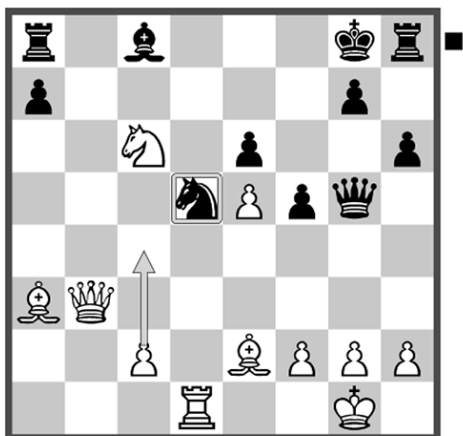


*Position after: 25.Ke1!!±*

The position looks as though Kramnik's No Castling rules have been in play. Objectively speaking Black cannot really do the white king any harm. And not only that, but now both h3 and e6 are under attack and 25...Nf4 does not really cover e6 due to 26.g3 Nd5 27.h4!+- and funnily enough the black queen is trapped.

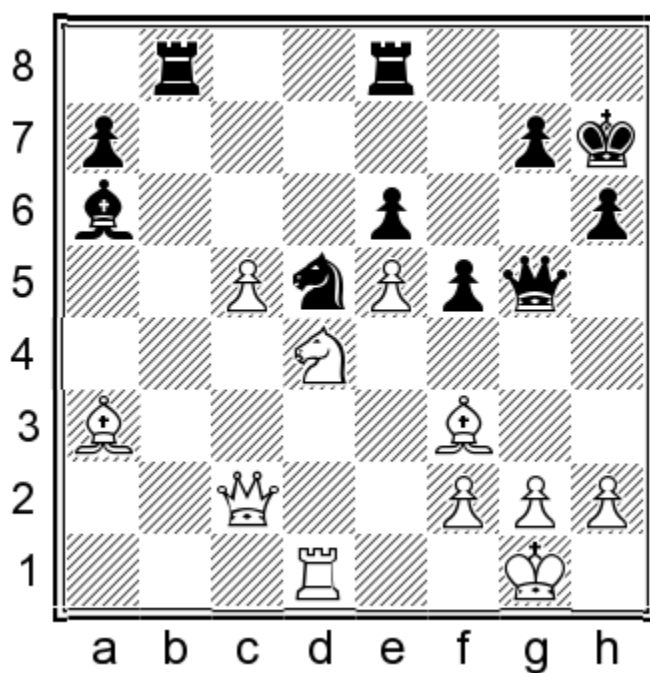
**B2.2)** 21...Re8 already drops some material after 22.Rxd5! exd5 23.Bxd5+ Be6 24.Bxe6+ Rxe6 25.Qb7++- and White wins the a8-rook.

**B2.3)** 21...Kg8 22.Be2 The plan is once again to kick the d5-knight away with c4.



*Position after: 22.Be2*

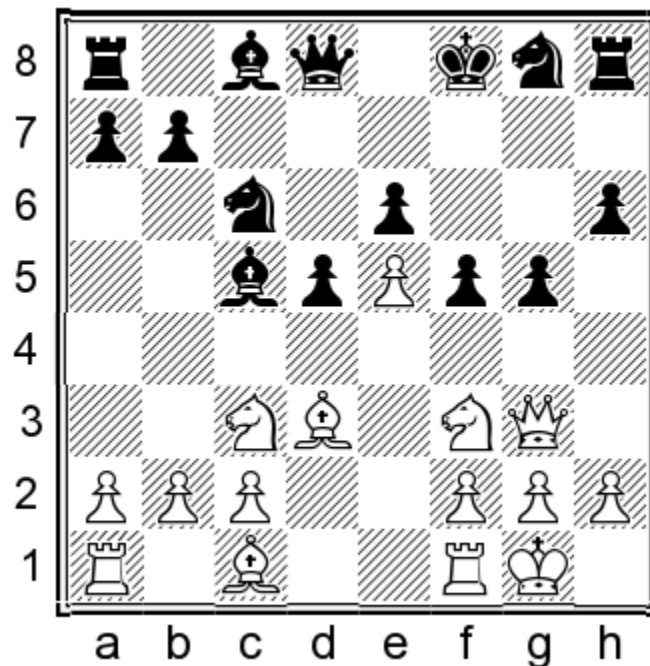
22...Kh7 23.c4 Ba6 24.Bf3 Nb6 25.c5 Nd5 26.Nd4 White has gained a strong passed pawn and e6 is still a terrible weakness. 26...Rab8 27.Qc2 Rhe8



*Position after: 27...Rhe8*

28.Bxd5 It is time to consolidate the advantage. [28.c6 is imprecise because of a tactical hit 28...Ne3! 29.fxe3 Qxe3+ 30.Kh1 Qxa3∞ when things are far from clear.]  
 28...exd5 29.c6± Black's pawns on d5 and f5 are terribly weak, whereas White's passed pawns are impressive! White can reinforce their structure with Bd6 and then begin to think about collecting some more material.

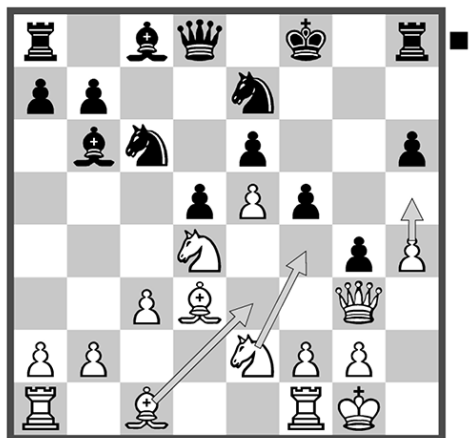
### 10.0-0 Bxc5



*Position after: 10...Bxc5*

Black somehow managed to make some sense out of the move ...h6 but their structure will be full of holes after 11.Ne2 Nge7 12.c3 Bb6 13.h4! where White gets the f4-square for their knights.

**13...g4 14.Nfd4±**

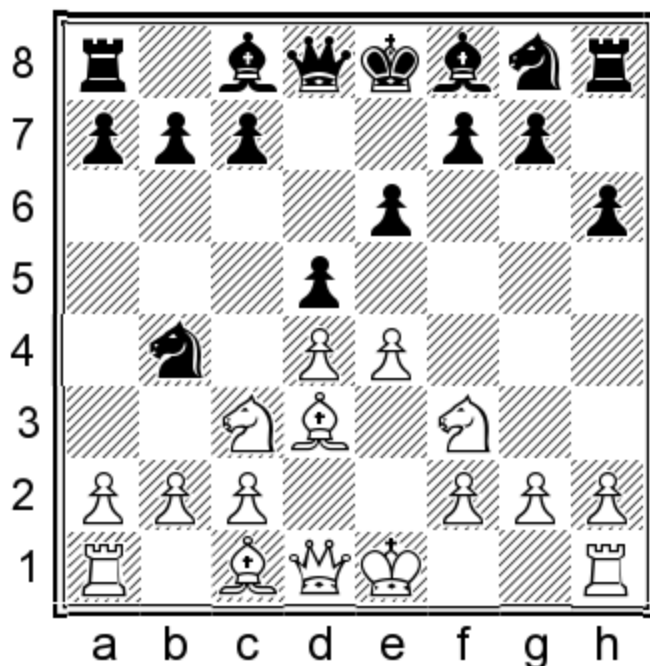


*Position after: 14.Nfd4±*

Black has a lot to think about. White can follow-up with Be3, Nf4 and maybe h5 at a suitable moment, fixing the weakness on h6.

**e) 3...h6 4.Bd3 Nc6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 h6 4.Bd3 Nc6 5.Nf3 Nb4**





*Position after: 5...Nb4*

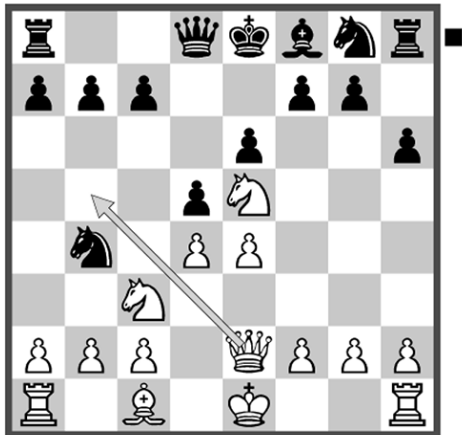
### **6.Bb5+**

The reason for giving Bb5+ is to provoke Black into playing c6. Black's knight on b4 will be forced to retreat to a6. Therefore one can argue that it is better to play 3...a6 instead of 3...h6, but as we've already seen it is not so rosy there either.

6.Be2 Nf6 7.e5 Ne4 8.a3 Nxc3 9.bxc3 Nc6 This is the difference. With a pawn on c6, the knight has only the a6-square.

### **6...c6**

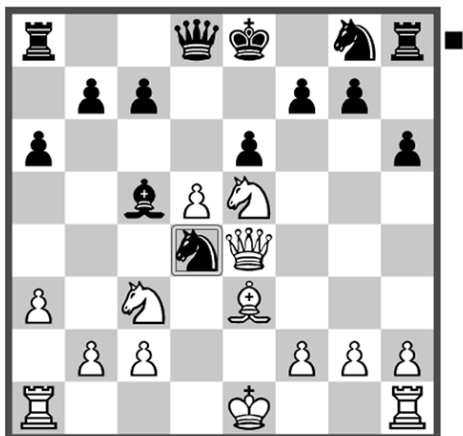
6...Bd7?! gives White a plenty of extra time. 7.Bxd7+ Qxd7 8.Ne5 Qd8 9.Qe2



*Position after: 9.Qe2*

9...a6 [9...dxe4 10.Qb5+ does not end well for Black. 10...c6 11.Qxb7 There is no time to take on c2 because of the mate in one threat. 11...Be7 12.Nxc6 Qc8 13.Qxc8+ Rxc8 14.Nxb4 Bxb4 15.Bd2± The dust has settled and

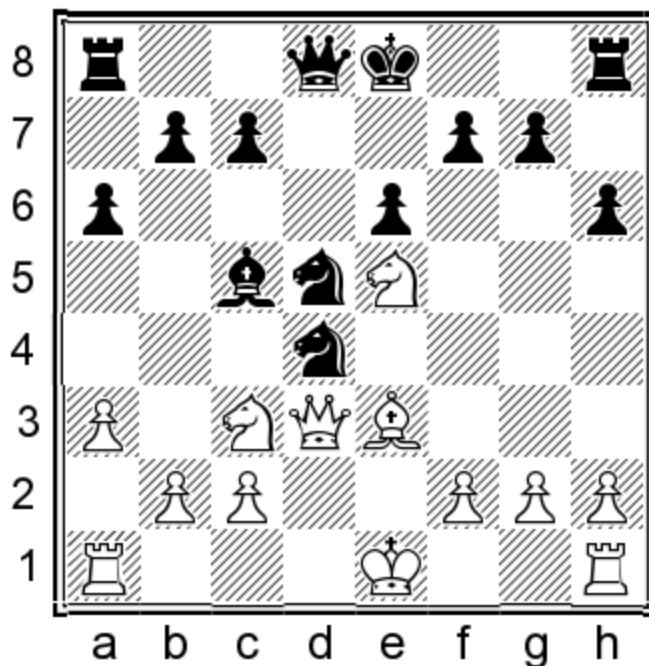
White is a clear pawn up.] 10.a3 Nc6 11.exd5 Once again Black has to enter unfavorable complications because they cannot afford to open the e-file. 11...Nxd4 12.Qe4 Bc5 13.Be3



*Position after: 13.Be3*

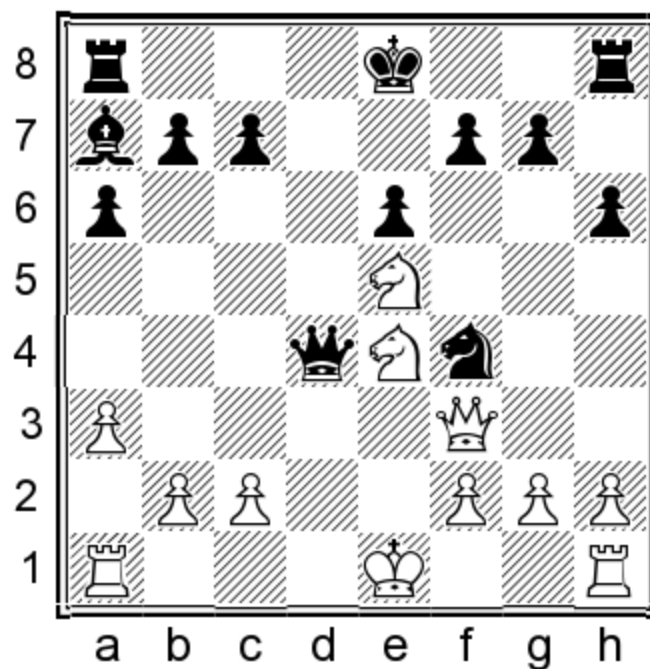
Black's knight is very shaky.

**A)** 13...Nf6 14.Qd3 Nxd5



*Position after: 14...Nxd5*

Black is trying to survive with the help of a few tactical tricks but with a bit of precision their position is just lost. 15.Ne4 [15.Bxd4? Nf4 is the trick which Black was pinning their hopes on.] 15...Ba7 [15...Bb4+ is another trick, hoping for White to take, in which case Black can recapture with the knight, giving a fork on c2, but 16.Kf1+- is just over as all Black's pieces are hanging.] 16.Bxd4 Nf4 17.Qf3 Qxd4

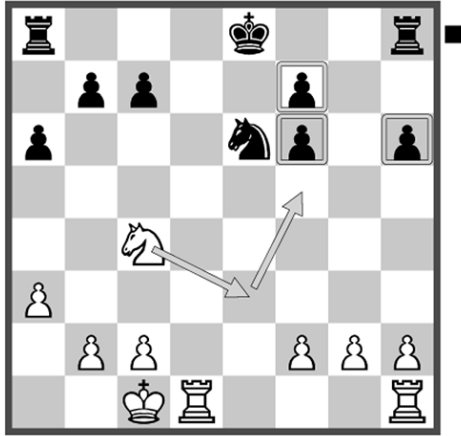


*Position after: 17...Qxd4*

Had the white knight still been on c3 its f4-colleague would be defended, but now after 18.Qxf4 f5 19.Ng6+- White defends their queen on f4 and attacks the rook on h8.

**B)** 13...exd5 14.Qd3 Ne6 There is no other way for Black, but even without queens they will face serious problems.

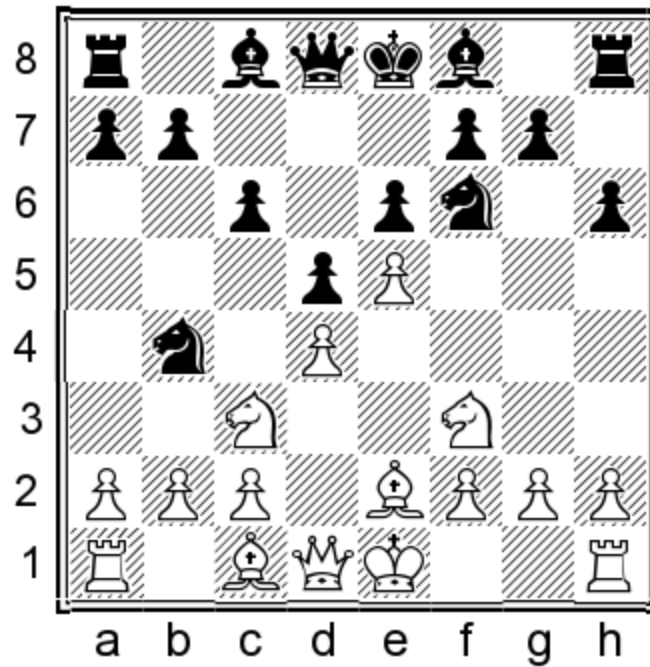
15.Bxc5 Nxc5 16.Qxd5 Qxd5 17.Nxd5 Ne6 18.0-0-0 The only way to develop the kingside safely is 18...Nf6, however after 19.Nxf6+ gxf6 20.Nc4±



*Position after: 20.Nc4±*

Black's pawn structure is shattered and White is ahead in development. White has easy play with a comfortable advantage here.

**7.Be2 Nf6 8.e5**

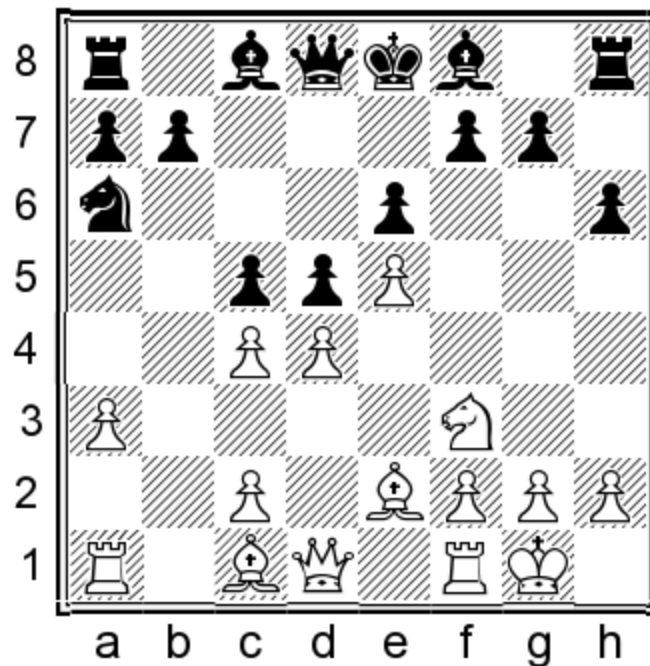


*Position after: 8.e5*

### **8...Ne4**

8...Nd7 is very passive. 9.a3 Na6 10.0-0 c5 11.Nb5± planning c2-c4 or Qxd4-g4, switching to the kingside, gives White a great edge.

**9.a3 Nxc3 10.bxc3 Na6 11.0-0 c5 12.c4**



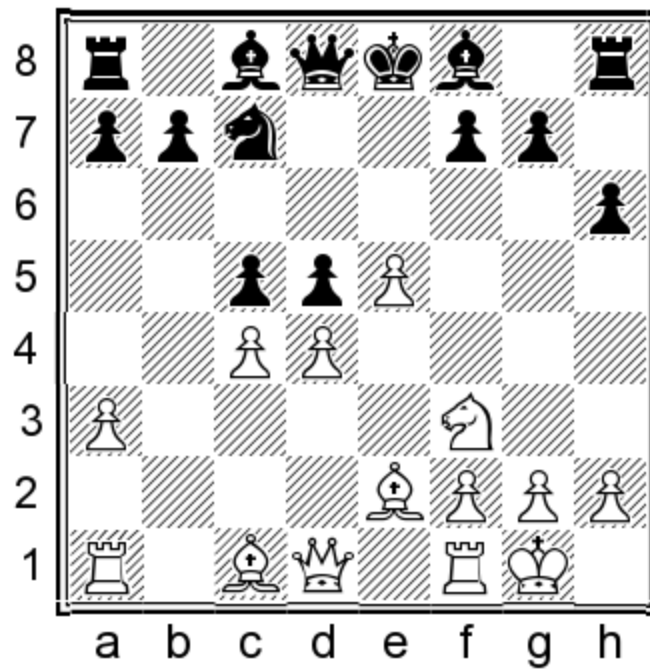
*Position after: 12.c4*

White's doubled pawns are a strength here rather than a disadvantage as White can recycle the attacker on c4 with cxd5 and c4 again. At the same time Black is underdeveloped and their knight on a6 feels a bit strange to say the least.

## **12...Be7**

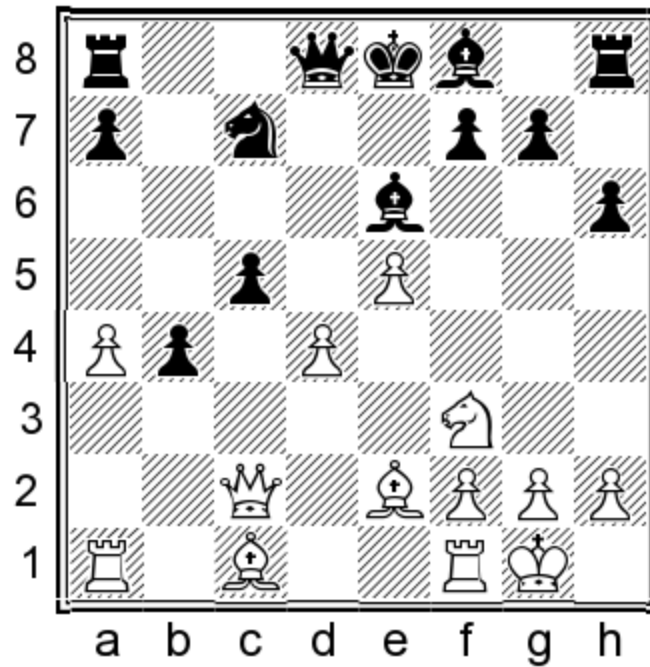
Black intends to castle as quickly as possible so if we want to rip their position apart we need to act fast too.

12...Nc7 is trying to defend the white squares in Black's camp but the simple 13.cxd5 exd5 14.c4



*Position after: 14.c4*

gives White a nice advantage. 14...dxc4 15.Bxc4 b5  
 Understandably the underdeveloped defender does not  
 want to open the position with ...cxd4, and needs to stop  
 d4-d5 too, but it comes at the cost of creating more  
 weaknesses. 16.Be2 Be6 Black stopped d5, but now their  
 queenside will come under attack. 17.a4 b4 18.Qc2



*Position after: 18.Qc2*

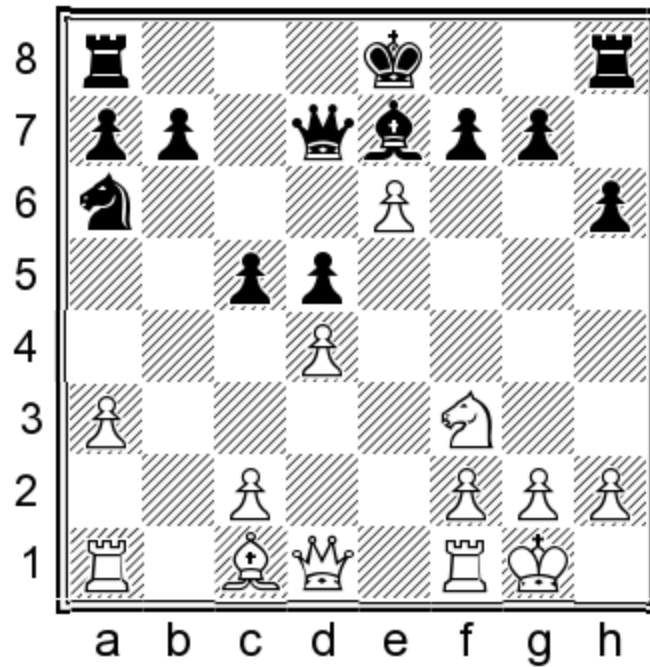
Finally the position opens up and White's pieces come to life, while Black's king is still stuck on e8. 18...Qd5 19.dxc5 b3 20.Qc3 Qxc5 21.Qb2± with Be3 and Rc1 to follow. Most likely Black will have to give up at least the b3-pawn in order to survive.

**13.cxd5 exd5 14.Bb5+**

With a deep point of dragging the queen to e6!

**14...Bd7 15.Bxd7+ Qxd7 16.e6!!**





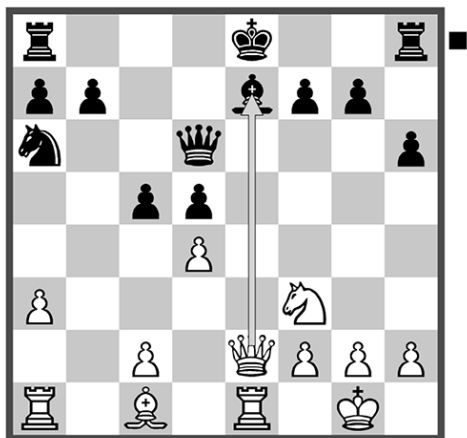
*Position after: 16.e6!!*

An important blow. If Black could get their knight to e6 and advance their queenside they'd be actually doing more than fine, but there is no way we are giving them time to do that.

**16...Qxe6**

16...fxe6 17.Ne5+- with Qh5 to come is just game over.

**17.Re1 Qd6 18.Qe2**

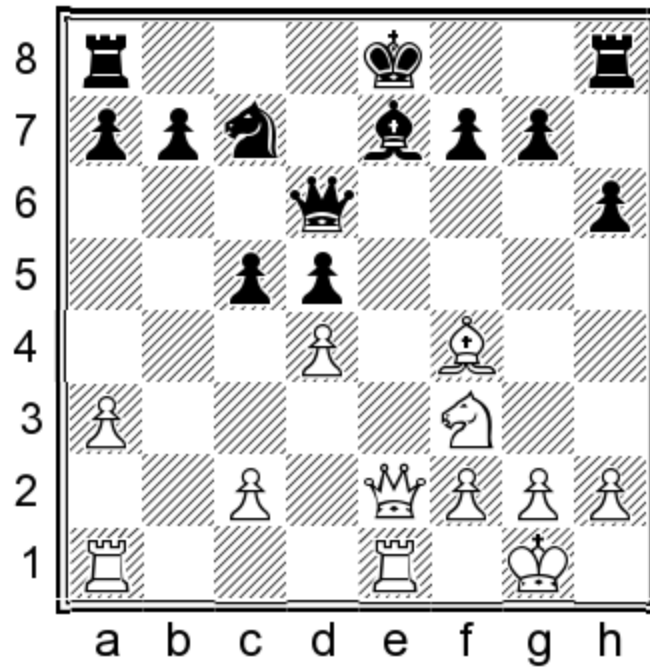


*Position after: 18.Qe2*

Stopping Black from castling by keeping an eye on the e7-bishop. This is reminiscent of the immortal game Steinitz – Von Bardeleben, Hastings 1895!

### **18...Qe6**

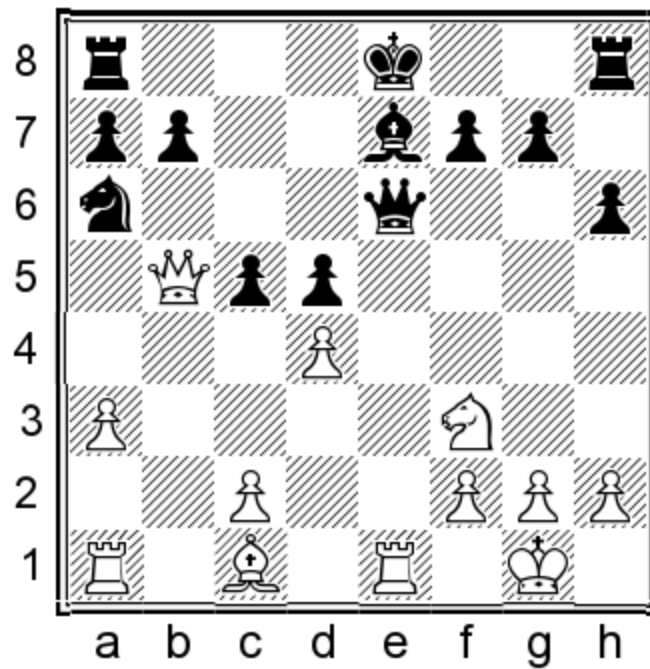
Black also does not have time to obstruct the e-file with ...Ne6 because if 18...Nc7 19.Bf4!



*Position after: 19.Bf4!*

19...Qxf4 20.Qxe7#

**19.Qb5+**

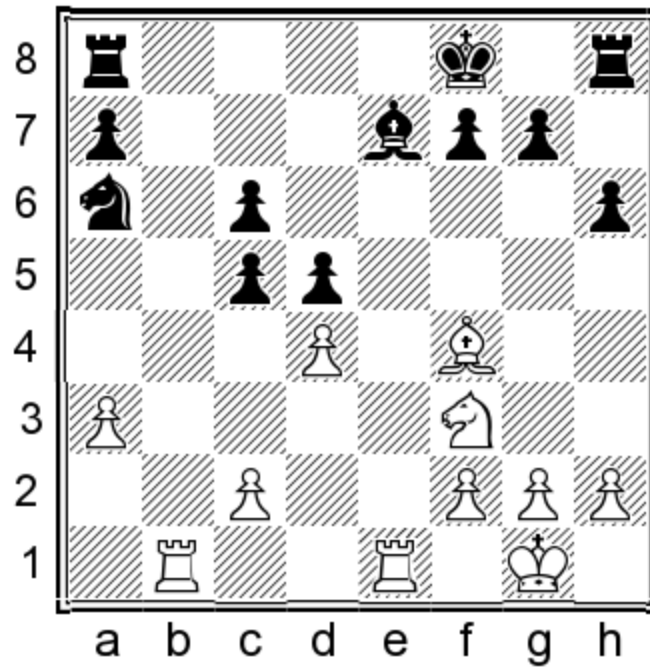


*Position after: 19.Qb5+*

Black's problems continue even with the queens exchanged.

**19...Qd7**

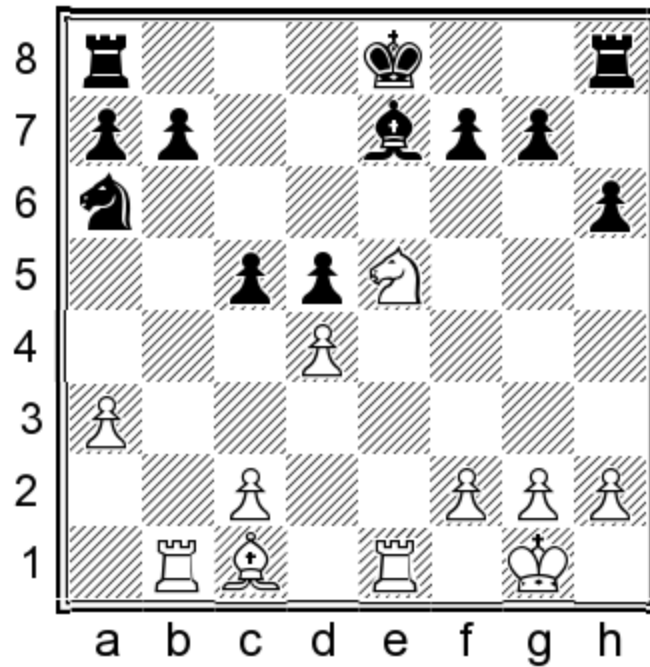
19...Qc6 20.Qxc6+ bxc6 21.Bf4 Kf8 22.Rab1



*Position after: 22.Rb1*

is also quite bad. White's rook will be very strong on b7.  
 22...cxd4 23.Rb7 Bd8 [23...Bxa3 24.Ra1+- drops a piece on the a-file immediately.] 24.Nxd4 Bb6 25.Nb3+- Black cannot stop Re7 and soon they will start giving back material with interest!

**20.Qxd7+ Kxd7 21.Ne5+ Ke8 22.Rb1**



*Position after: 22.Rb1*

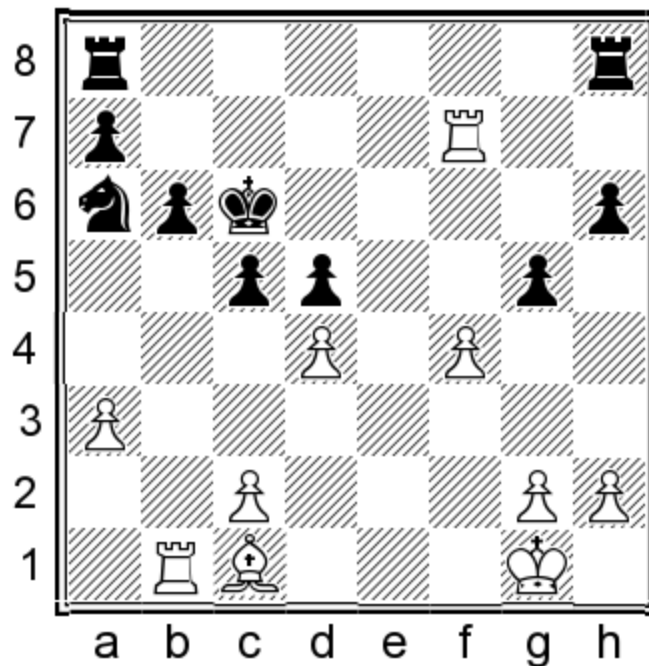
**22...b6**

22...Rb8 23.Bf4 is even worse as the rook will soon be harassed by the f4-bishop.

**23.Nc6**

Finally it seems that Black will have some peace, but unfortunately White's rook will invade their kingside.

**23...Kd7 24.Rxe7+ Kxc6 25.Rxf7 g5 26.f4±**



*Position after: 26.f4±*

Black's knight will have a hard time finding its way back into the game. Meanwhile, White can attack h6 and create a passed pawn on the kingside, on top of the fact that White's bishop is superior to Black's knight.

**f) 3...Be7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Be7**

This move is quite common against 3.Nd2. However against 3.Nc3 it is not effective as White's pieces develop quickly and White creates a lot of weaknesses on Black's kingside. IM Demidov had several games in this variation from the black side.

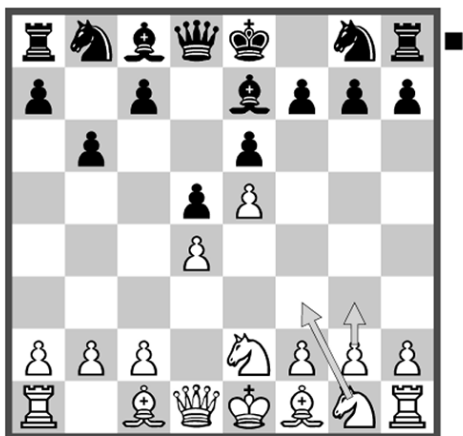
**4.e5!**



**4...c5**

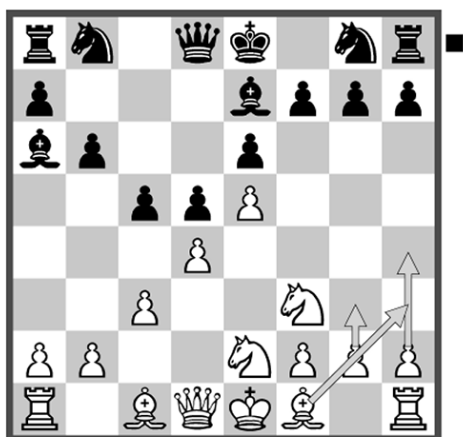
4...b6 Black is trying to exchange their light-squared bishop, quite a common theme in most of the French variations. The majority of games went 5.Nf3, then Qg4, and h4. I like 5.Nce2





*Position after: 5.Nce2*

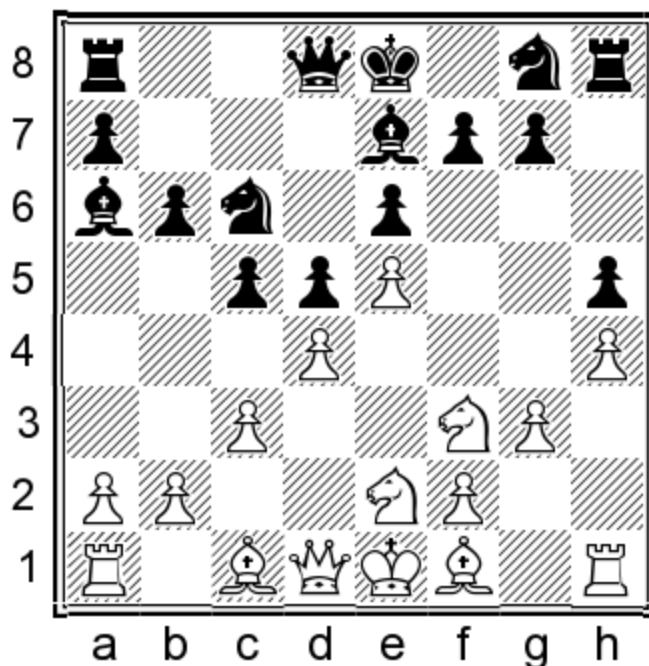
here for White as they are able to get the upper hand with a rather simple plan. We are temporarily crossing Black's bishop-exchanging plans, although we are not completely against it if we manage to find some targets on the kingside in return. White has natural squares for their pieces and plans to go Nf3 and then either develop the bishop with the g3 or even allow the bishop exchange under favorable circumstances. The same thing cannot be said about Black's development as they will mainly struggle with the g8-knight. 5...Ba6 6.c3 c5 7.Nf3



*Position after: 7.Nf3*

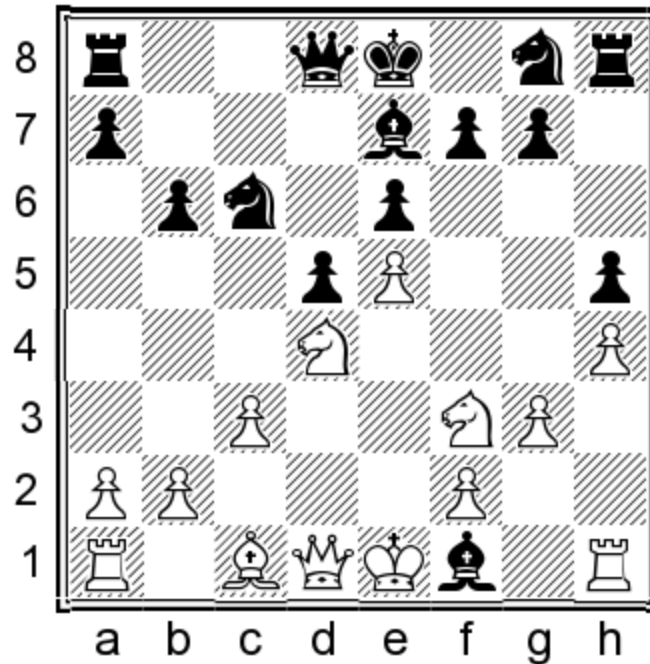
White has managed to build a compact central pawn formation. They will further develop with the natural g3 and Bg2, or perhaps even h4, taking some space on the kingside, and Bh3. If they manage to stop Black's knight from coming to f5 (meaning if they manage to swap it for their bishop), White is also fine with playing Nf4 and accepting the ...Ba6xf1 exchange.

**A)** 7...Nc6 8.g3 h5 Black needs to get the g8-knight out somehow so ...h5 is more of a developing rather than attacking move. As the knight would be simply monstrous on f5, White would be more than happy to take it on h6 with their bishop. And so a waiting game begins, as Black wants to go ...Nh6 only after the Bc1's diagonal is blocked. 9.h4 Actually Black can get to this crossroads in a variety of ways and the same position arises after 7...h5 too. In the main line we analyze 9...g6, but here we will focus on other options for Black.



*Position after: 9.h4*

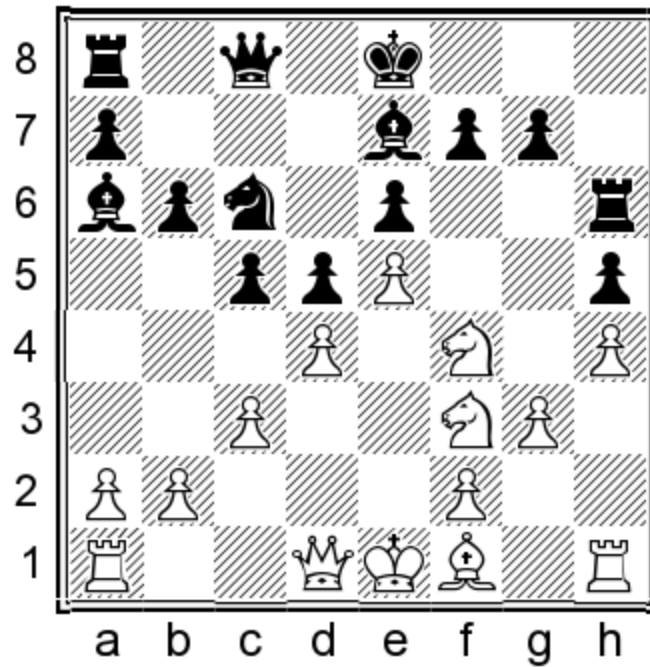
**A1)** It is true that after 9...cxd4 10.Nexd4 (White is hesitant to allow the check on b4 after recapturing with the pawn) 10...Bxf1



*Position after: 10...Bxf1*

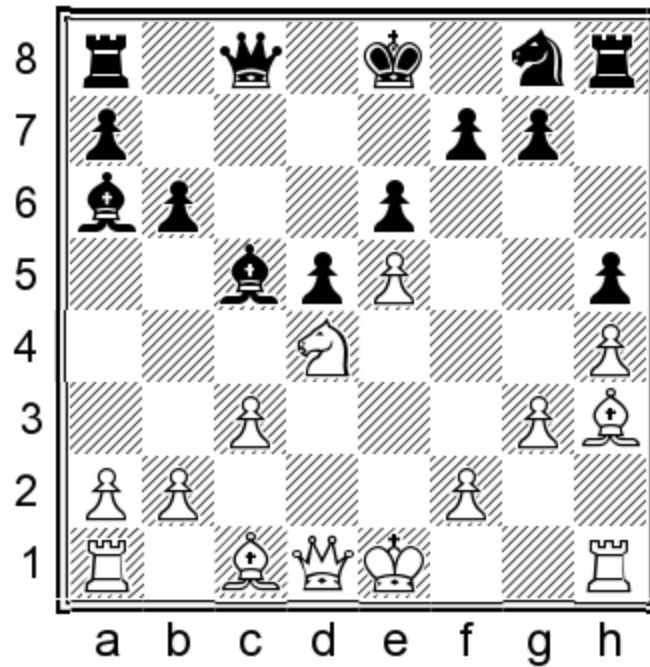
Black manages to execute their bishop exchanging plan, but as with anything in life, it comes at a cost. White's knights occupy the d4-square, the light squares on Black's queenside are quite weak and Black still needs to solve the matter of developing their kingside.

**A2)** 9...Qc8 forces us to change our plans a bit. The queen is obviously not so well placed on c8, but it has a clever idea in mind against our favorite Nf4 set-up. We should develop normally with 10.Bh3 and let Black sort out their strange queenside piece placement. At some point they will have to either play ... Qd7 and lose a tempo or go for [note that 10.Be3 Nh6 11.Bxh6 Rxh6 12.Nf4



*Position after: 12.Nf4*

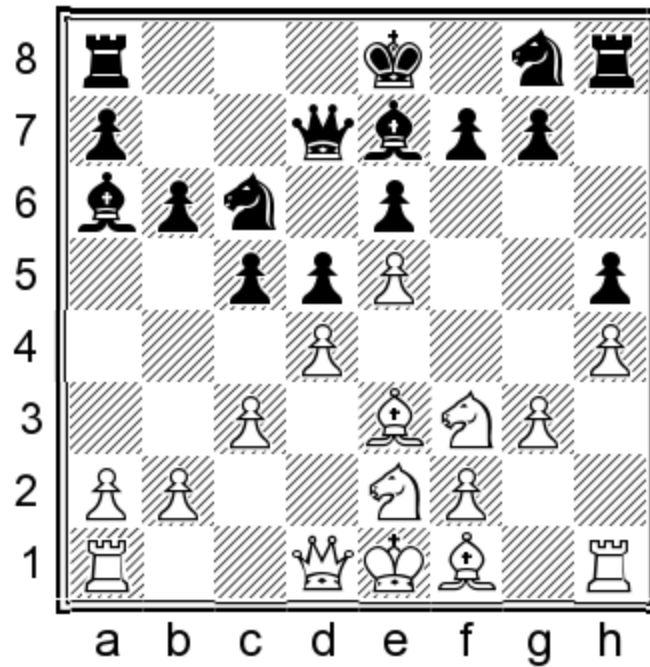
does not work so well due to the a6-bishop being covered. White has some trouble keeping everything under control, say 12...cxd4 13.cxd4 Bb4+-+ and White loses the d4-pawn.] 10...cxd4 11.Nexd4 Nxd4 12.Nxd4 once again giving us the d4-square. 12...Bc5



*Position after: 12...Bc5*

Seemingly now Black can develop their knight to e7 safely, but we have the strong 13.Ne2 both getting ready for castling kingside and preparing the 13...Ne7 14.b4!+-trick.

**A3)** 9...Qd7 Black is waiting for White's knight to move from e2 to f4, which would allow Black to get their knight to f5 via h6. 10.Be3

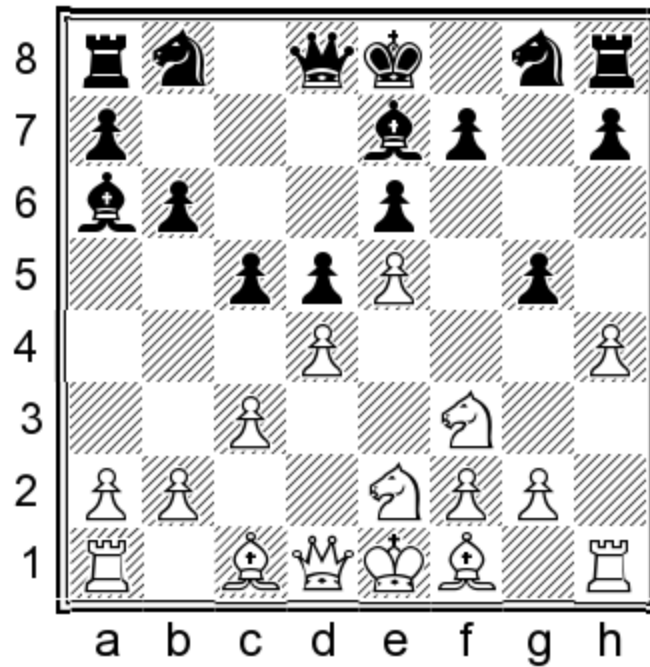


*Position after: 10.Be3*

10...Nh6 [10...cxd4 11.Nexd4 Bxf1 12.Kxf1, having the d4-square under control, is as always quite nice for White]

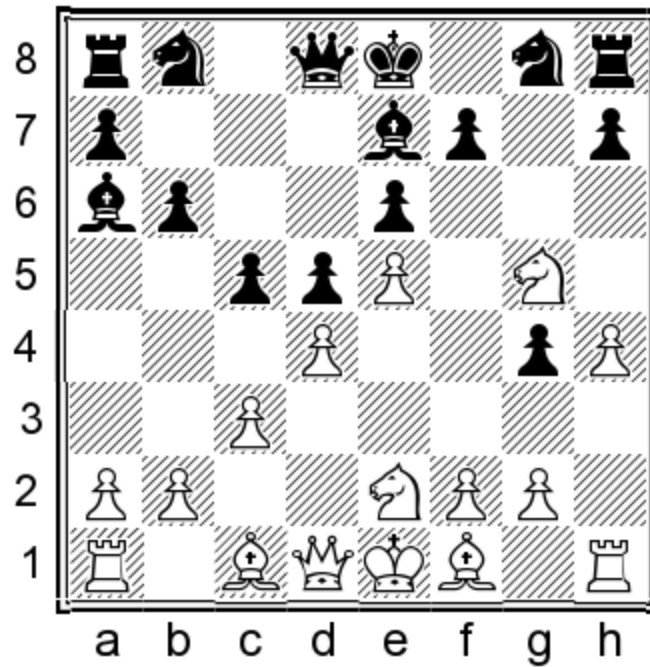
11.Bxh6 Rxh6 12.Nf4<sup>2</sup> White has a pleasant position here.

**B)** 7...g5 Another French-style move which is effective in 4.Nd2 setups. Here White has several options. I chose 8.h4



*Position after: 8.h4*

which is quite forcing, but White can also play the simple Be3. 8...g4 [8...gxh4 9.Nf4 Bxf1 10.Kxf1 Black is temporarily a pawn up. However White's position is much better as Black cannot develop their pieces easily and it's only a matter of time before the weak h4-pawn falls.] 9.Ng5



*Position after: 9.Ng5*

**B1)** 9...h6? Many Black players would be tempted to win a piece here, however White does not need to worry about anything thanks to the following tactics. 10.Nxf7



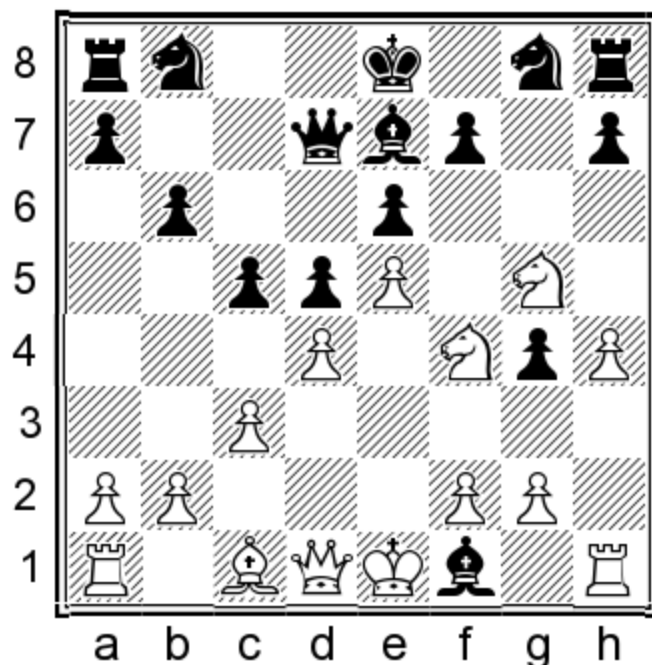
Kxf7 11.Nf4+-

*Position after: 11.Nf4+- At first sight it might look premature to judge this position as being lost but Black is unable to prevent the white queen from penetrating their defenses. 11...Bxf1 [11...h5 also does not stop White due to*



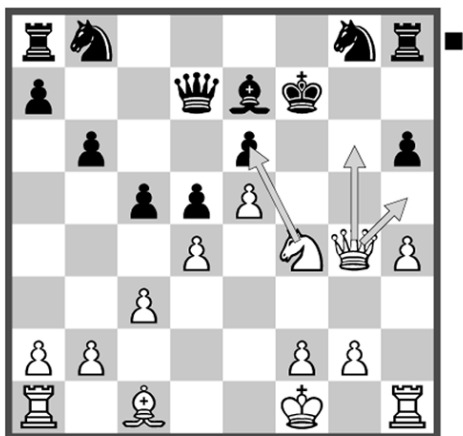
*12.Bxa6 Nxa6 13.Qd3!, double attacking the knight and the g6-square.] 12.Qxg4 Ke8 13.Kxf1 Like in a game of checkers, Black will lose all their pawns, and White's attack continues!*

**B2)** 9...Qd7 10.Nf4 Bxf1



*Position after: 10...Bxf1*

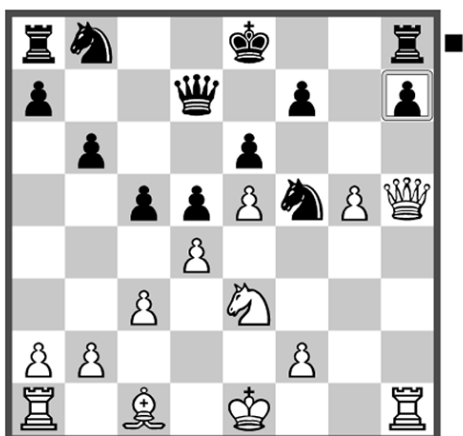
**B2.1)** 11.Kxf1 Nh6 and it is not so easy to break through Black's defenses. [11...h6? is of course the kind of position we enjoy. 12.Nxf7! Kxf7 13.Qxg4



*Position after: 13.Qxg4*

Black cannot defend from all the checks White's queen is about to deliver, e.g. 13...Bf8 14.Qh5+ Ke7 15.Ng6++- winning a rook.]

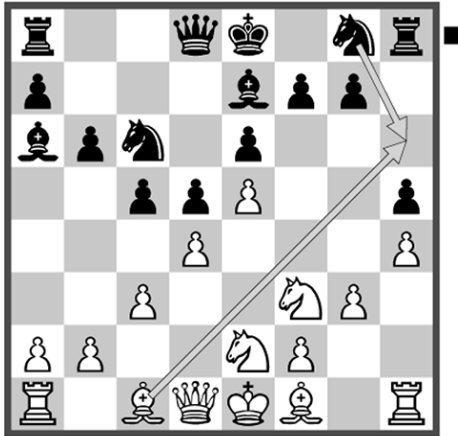
**B2.2)** 11.Qxg4! We should not hesitate here otherwise Black might be able to fortify the kingside. 11...Nh6 [In case of 11...Ba6 we don't even need Black to encourage us with ...h6 as 12.Nxf7! Kxf7 13.Qh5+ Kf8 14.Rh3+- with Rf3 to follow is a killer.] 12.Qh5 Bxg5 13.hxg5 Bxg2 14.Nxg2 Nf5 15.Ne3±



*Position after: 15.Ne3±*

White has the better pawn structure (in particular the h7-pawn is very likely to become a target), more space, and a safer king.

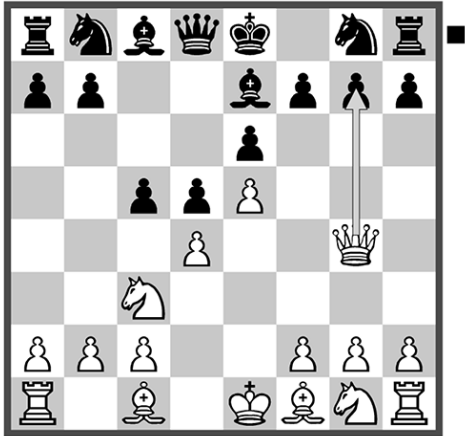
C) 7...h5 8.h4 Nc6 9.g3



*Position after: 9.g3*

Remember we need to have the BxNh6 option so that Black's knight cannot get to f5. Therefore we should refrain from playing Nf4 too soon. For more information about this little tabiya you can see the 7...Nc6 move order too as we discuss some clever ways for Black to shake up our set-up there. 9...g6 10.Bh3 Nh6 11.0-0 Because we cannot go for the Nf4 plan with the bishop on h3 anymore, it is time to change the set-up. [11.Bxh6 Rxh6 12.0-0 is a possibility as well, but what is the bishop doing on h3?] 11...Nf5 12.Bxf5 gxf5 13.Re1± Now White's plan is to exchange the dark-squared bishops on g5 and in doing so gain the f4- and g5-squares for their knights.

**5.Qg4**

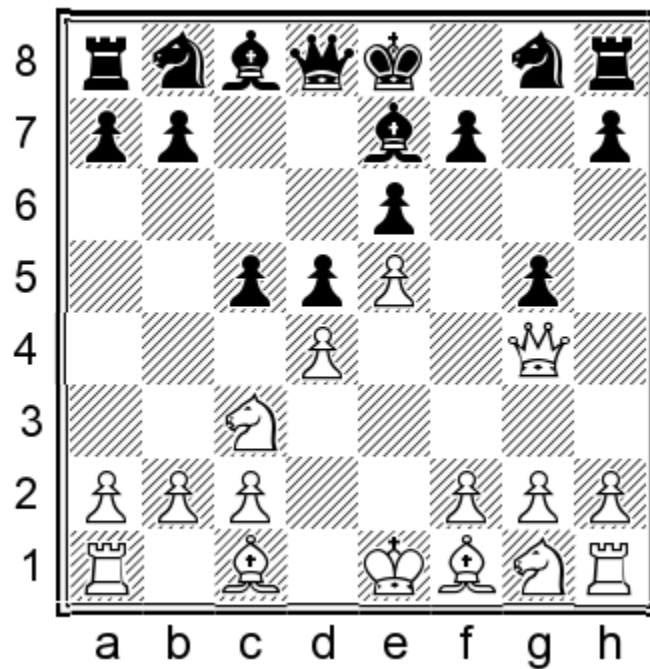


*Position after: 5.Qg4*

Making use of the obvious downside of Black's 3rd move. The g7-pawn is under attack and it is not so easy to defend it.

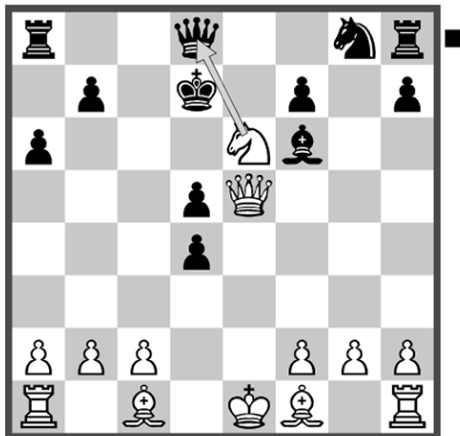
**5...g6**

**A) 5...g5?!** This is a very courageous defense to say the least.



*Position after: 5...g5?!*

**A1)** 6.Qh5 Equally good and stopping Black's advancement of ...h5. 6...cxd4 7.Nb5 Nc6 8.Nf3 a6 9.Nxg5! Black was asking for trouble and they are definitely getting into some. White threatens to capture on f7. 9...Nxe5 10.Nxe6! Another nice blow. There is no choice for Black but 10...Bxe6 11.Qxe5 Bf6 12.Nc7+ Kd7 13.Nxe6!

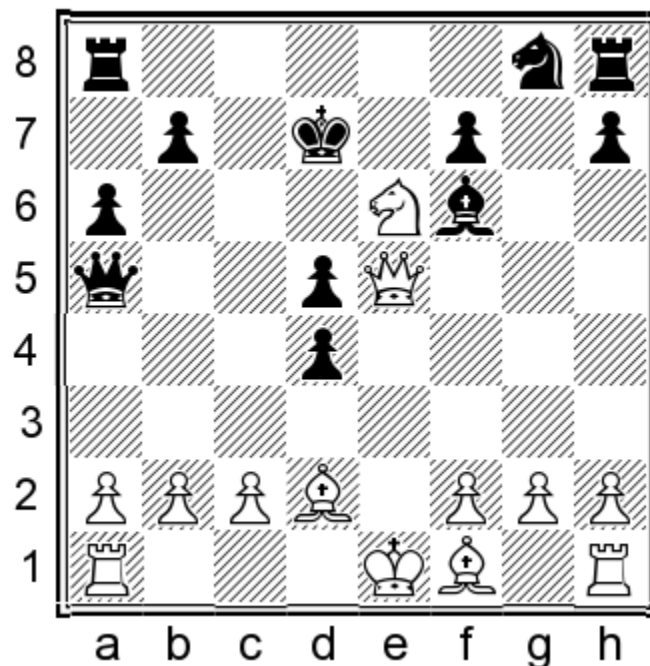


*Position after: 13.Nxe6!*

Black can choose either a bad middlegame with their king being on the run in the center or a miserable endgame with a broken pawn structure.

**A1.1)** 13...fxe6 14.Qe2 Qc7 15.g3 Getting a nice outpost for the dark-squared bishop. 15...Ne7 16.Bf4 e5 17.Bd2<sup>2</sup> White lured the black pawn forward and after liquidating Black's center the black king will become very vulnerable.

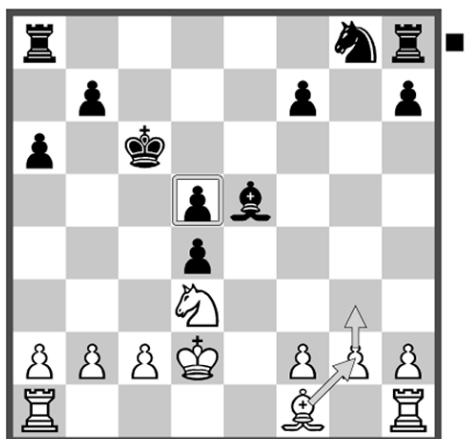
**A1.2)** 13...Qa5+ 14.Bd2



*Position after: 14.Bd2*

14...Qxd2+ [14...Bxe5 15.Nf8+! is quite an important move, not allowing Black to improve their structure with ...fxe6. 15...Rxf8 16.Bxa5 Re8 17.0-0-0<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that White has a comfortable advantage here. Their bishop pair is very strong and Black's isolated pawns on

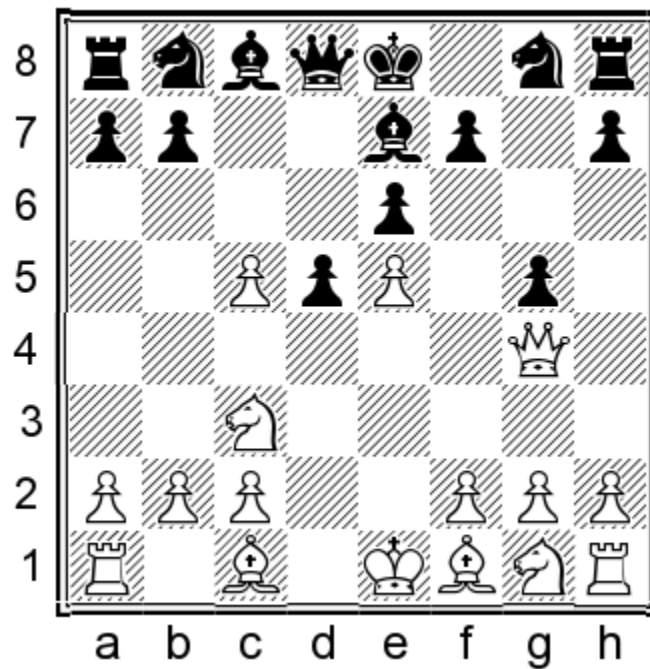
the d-file will be very tough to defend.] 15.Kxd2 Bxe5  
16.Nc5+ Kc6 17.Nd3<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 17.Nd3<sup>2</sup>*

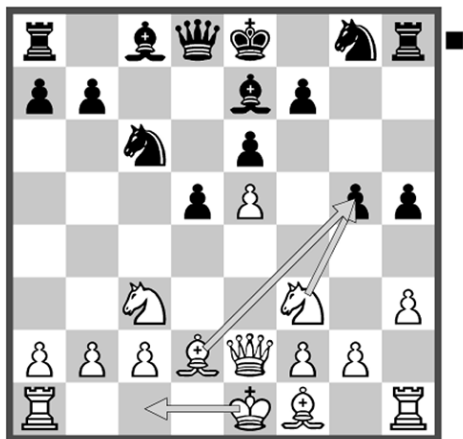
Even though there are opposite-colored bishops on the board, Black's defensive task is far from being easy. Moreover, since the d5-pawn is on a light square, it is impossible for the black bishop to help defend it. White will put a sniper on g2 and start besieging the weakness very soon.

**A2)** 6.dxc5



*Position after: 6.dxc5*

**A2.1)** 6...h5 7.Qe2 Nc6 8.h3 Stopping the ...g4 push before developing their knight to f3. 8...Bxc5 9.Nf3 Be7 10.Bd2 followed by 0-0-0.

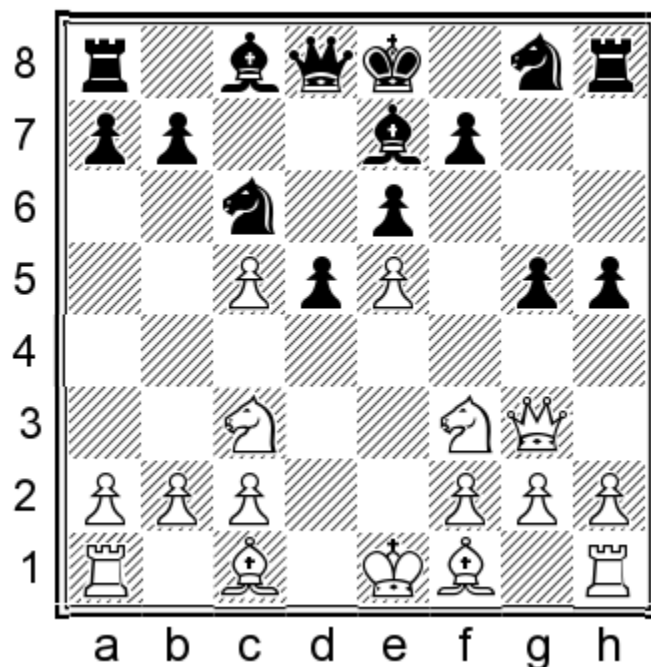


*Position after: 10.Bd2*



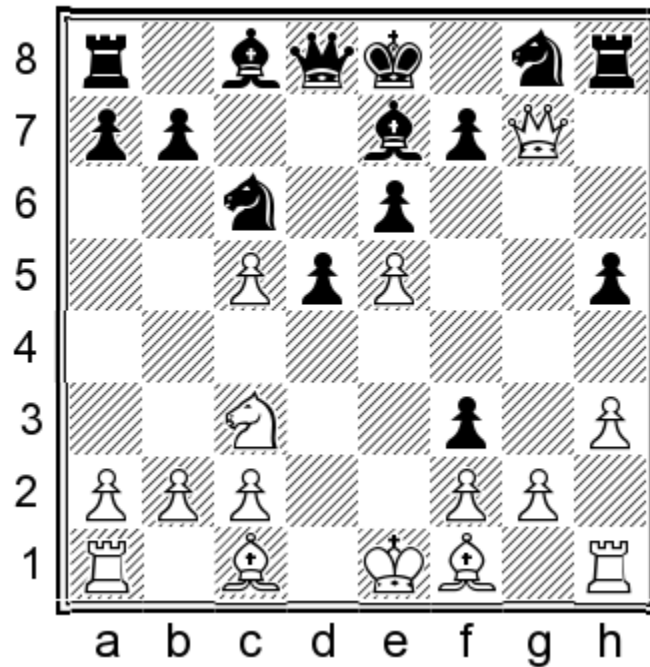
It is quite difficult for Black to play this position as their king has nowhere to hide. Castling kingside would be extremely risky after ...g5 and ...h5, but at the same time it cannot go to the queenside because Black needs to constantly protect g5. Therefore Black's queen cannot leave the d8-square.

**A2.2)** 6...Nc6 7.Nf3 h5 8.Qg3



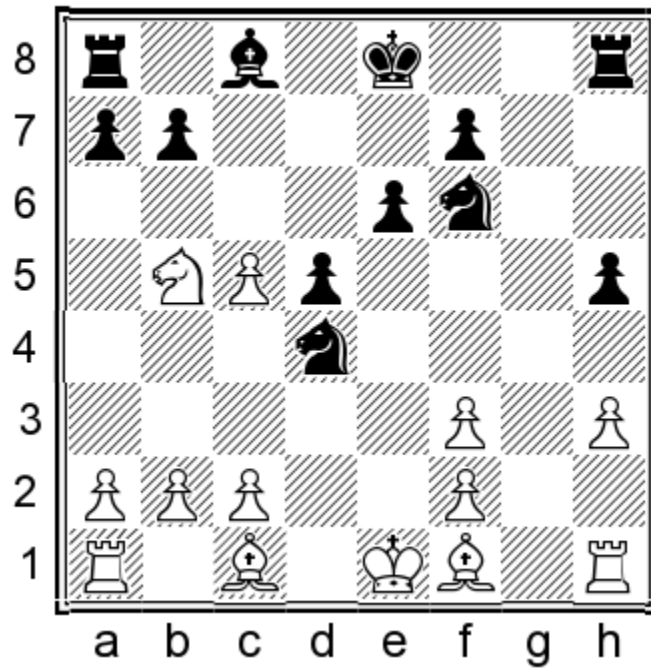
*Position after: 8.Qg3*

This is a more reasonable try for Black as White's queen might feel a bit uncomfortable on the kingside. 8...g4 [8...Nb4 9.Kd1 is not such a horrible concession considering Black cannot really defend their kingside after 9...g4 10.Ne1<sup>2</sup> with h2-h3 to come.] 9.h3! This is an important move to remember after 6.dxc5. 9...gxf3 10.Qg7



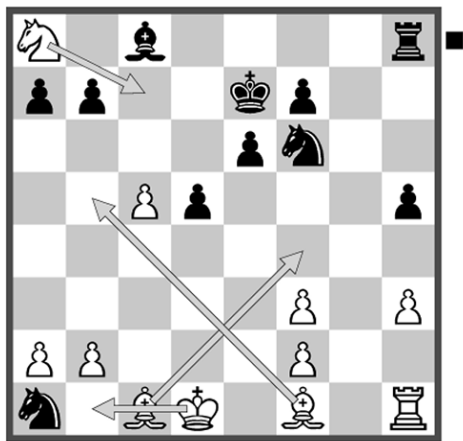
*Position after: 10.Qg7*

White will regain the sacrificed piece and enjoy a better endgame with the bishop pair advantage. 10...Bf6 [10...fxg2 11.Bxg2 Bf6 12.exf6 Qxf6 13.Qxf6 Nxf6 14.Be3<sup>2</sup> is more peaceful and good for White too. Black's bishop is suffocating behind black pawns and White's spatial advantage should tell in the long run. They will simply castle and then they can start bothering Black with Nb5 or just tighten the grip with f2-f4.] 11.exf6 Qxf6 12.Qxf6 Nxf6 13.gxf3 Nd4 14.Nb5! A few more tactics are needed before the smoke clears.



*Position after: 14.Nb5!*

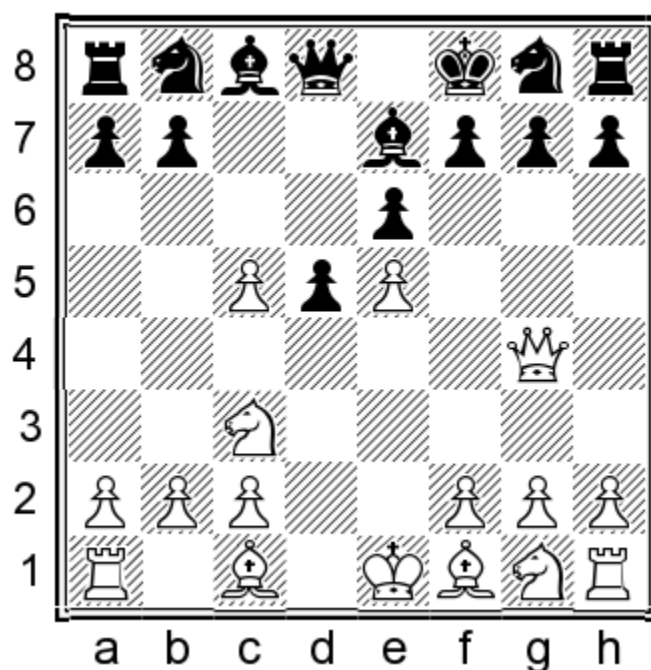
14...Nxc2+ [14...Nxb5 15.Bxb5+ Bd7 16.Bd3± leaves  
White a pawn up and with the bishop pair.] 15.Kd1 Nxa1  
16.Nc7+ Ke7 17.Nxa8±



*Position after: 17.Nxa8±*

White's knight will be able to get back into the game as any attempts by the black king to trap it will be stopped by white bishops from b5 and f4. It is difficult to say the same thing about its black counterpart on a1, though. White will get their knight out with Nc7, then develop their bishop to f4 and collect the helpless knight on a1 with their king.

**B) 5...Kf8 6.dxc5**

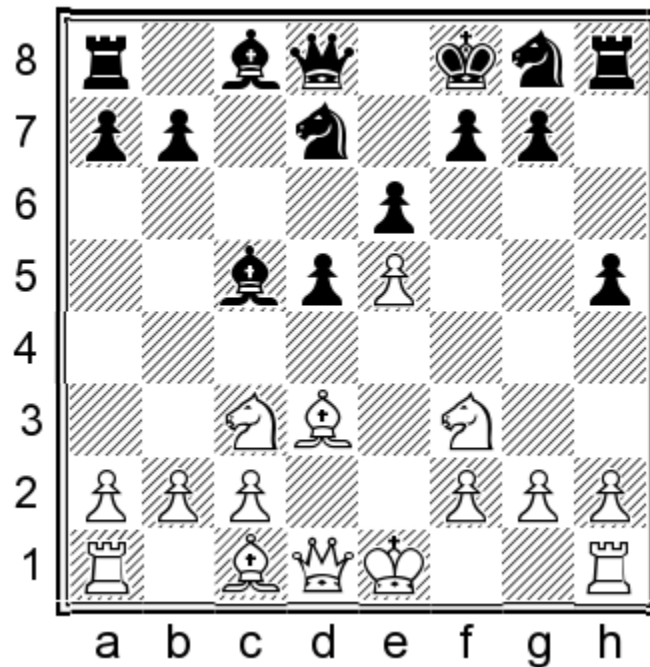


*Position after: 6.dxc5*

This reaction is a good one against all moves defending g7. Unsurprisingly Black will have problems with their king in this line.

**B1) 6...Bxc5 7.Nf3** Simple development works very well. 7...Nc6 8.Bd3 Nge7 9.0-0 Ng6 10.Re1<sup>2</sup> The e5-pawn is secured and now White can start disrupting Black's kingside with an h-pawn push. There is no obvious way for the defender to untangle their pieces.

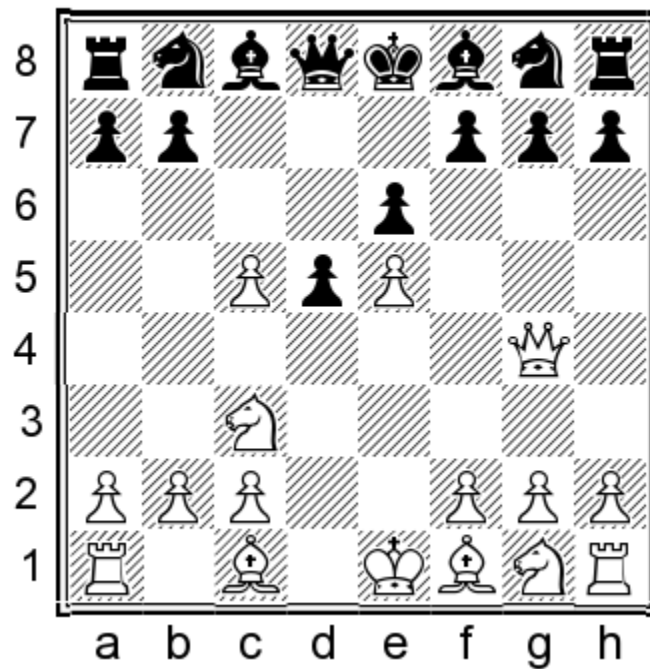
**B2)** 6...h5 7.Qd1 Bxc5 8.Nf3 Nd7 9.Bd3



*Position after: 9.Bd3*

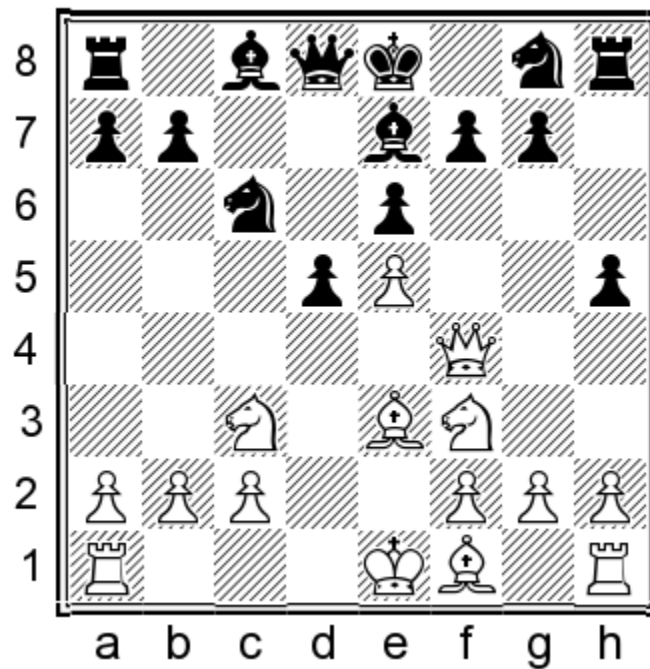
Again White is keeping things simple, mobilizing the rest of their army and counting on the awkward position of their opponent's king. 9...Ne7 10.0-0 a6 11.Bf4 Nc6 12.Qd2<sup>2</sup> White can strengthen the e5-outpost with Rae1, then possibly start focusing on the kingside.

**C)** 5...Bf8 6.dxc5



*Position after: 6.dxc5*

White does not really hope to hold the c5-pawn for long but they definitely intend to cause Black some inconvenience in recovering it. 6...h5 7.Qf4 Nc6 8.Nf3 Bxc5 Eventually Black managed to get their pawn back but they have paid a high price. Three bishop moves and weakening the kingside is a bit too much. 9.Be3 Naturally, if the black bishop disappears, then all the time it spent on going back and forth was wasted. 9...Be7 [Besides, 9...Bxe3 10.fxe3 gives White an easy plan of 0-0-0 and e3-e4.]

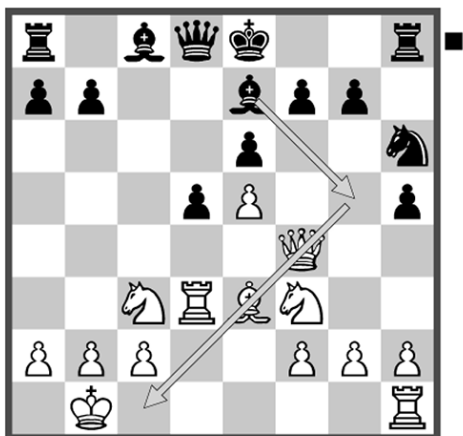


*Position after: 9...Be7*

**C1)** 10.0-0-0 Nh6 11.h3 is also acceptable, though my recommendation is to secure the f5-square too. [11.Kb1 Ng4 is a move we'd like to avoid.] 11...Nf5 12.Kb1 Nxe3 13.fxe3 g5 14.Qg3 h4 It is a playable position for White but it might be not so easy to break the dark-squared fortress without a dark-squared bishop.

**C2)** 10.Bd3 Black's knight will most likely come to h6 and threaten to jump to both f5 and g4, therefore we should take some countermeasures as soon as possible.

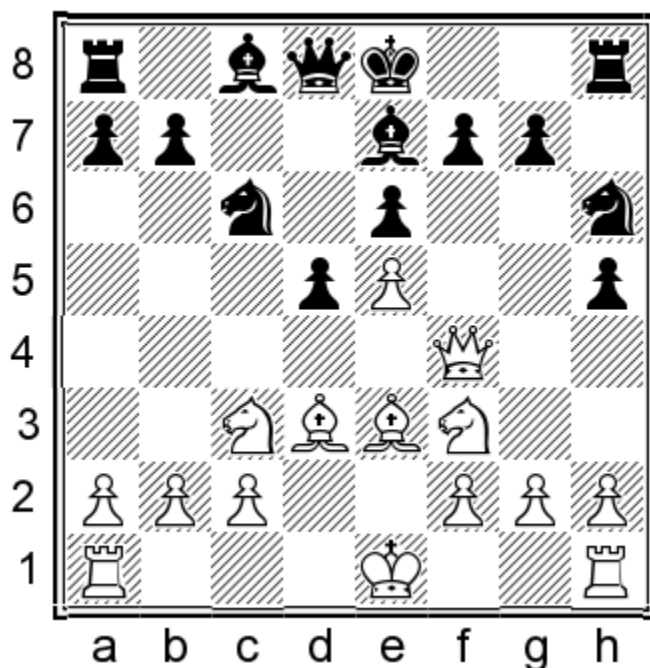
**C2.1)** It is true that 10...Nb4 takes the bishop pair but at the same time it leaves the d4-square unattended for White's knight. 11.0-0-0 Nxd3+ 12.Rxd3 Nh6 13.Kb1



*Position after: 13.Kb1*

A useful move in any case, mainly against a possible future ...Bg5 pin. 13...Nf5 14.Nd4 Nxe3 [14...g5 15.Qf3 Nxd4 16.Rxd4 is also nothing special. White will move their queen away and prepare f2-f4, opening the freshly weakened kingside.] 15.fxe3± White has full control of the position and an immediate threat of e3-e4.

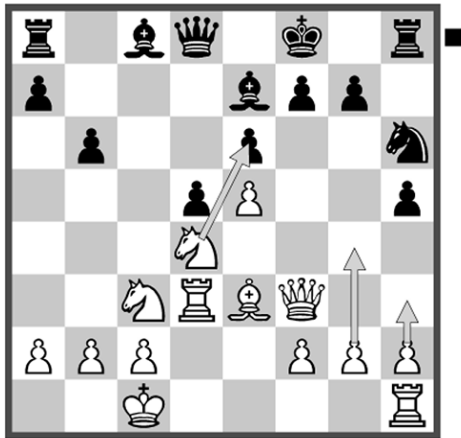
**C2.2) 10...Nh6**





*Position after: 10...Nh6*

11.Qg3 [11.h3 would be lovely but it unfortunately does not work due to White's Be3 being overloaded after 11...g5 12.Nxg5 d4!] 11...Kf8 [Thanks to the queen being on g3 there would be no point in 11...Ng4 because firstly the bishop can move away as f2 is covered, and secondly White can castle as Black needs to think twice about capturing the bishop on e3 as g7 is hanging.] 12.0-0-0 Nb4 13.Nd4 Nxd3+ 14.Rxd3 Once again taking the d3-bishop costs control over the d4-square. 14...b6 15.Qf3!<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 15.Qf3!<sup>2</sup>*

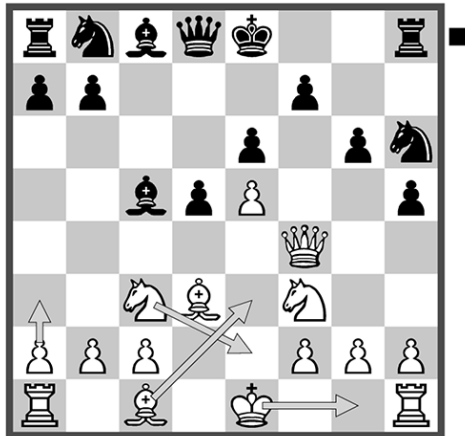
A clever move. It stops ...Ba6 because of the Nxe6+ strike and at the same time prepares the h3 & g4 advance on the kingside. White has a nice attacking position.

**D)** 5...cxd4 is of course bad due to 6.Qxg7+- picking up a rook.

**6.Nf3 h5**

Black needs the h6-square for their knight, but all their dark squares will be weak now.

**7.Qf4 Nh6 8.dxc5 Bxc5 9.Bd3<sup>2</sup>**



*Position after: 9.Bd3<sup>2</sup>*

White has a nice position. They will continue with castling kingside and then start the familiar knight maneuvers with Ne2, fighting for the d4 square with Be3 and Ned4. If Black threatens their d3-bishop with ...Nc6-b4, they can secure its position with a2-a3. At the same time the fate of the h6-knight is uncertain as it cannot stay on h6 forever and if it comes to f5, then Black needs take the Bxf5 plan into account.

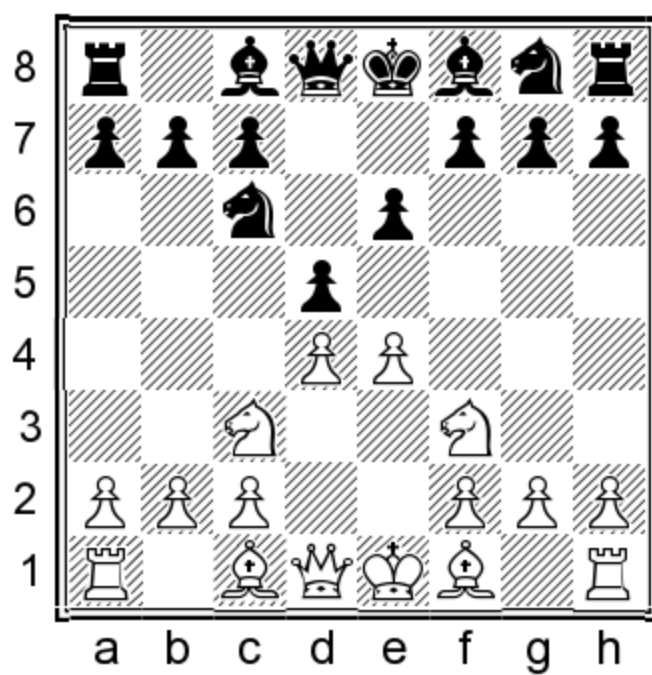
## **Part II**

### **3...Nc6**

## Chapter 2

### 3...Nc6 4.Nf3

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.Nf3



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 2 - 3...Nc6 4.Nf3

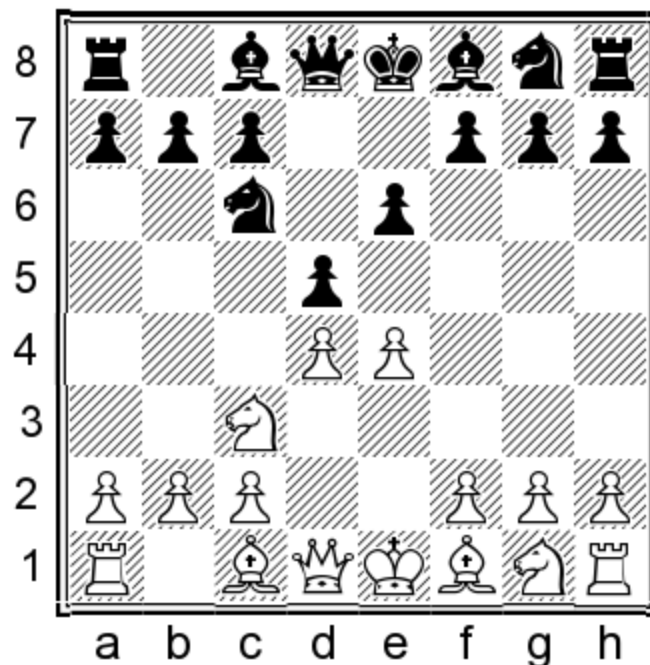
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.Nf3 Nf6 5.Bd3

a) 5...Nb4

b) 5...Bb4

**a) 5...Nb4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6**



*Position after: 3...Nc6*

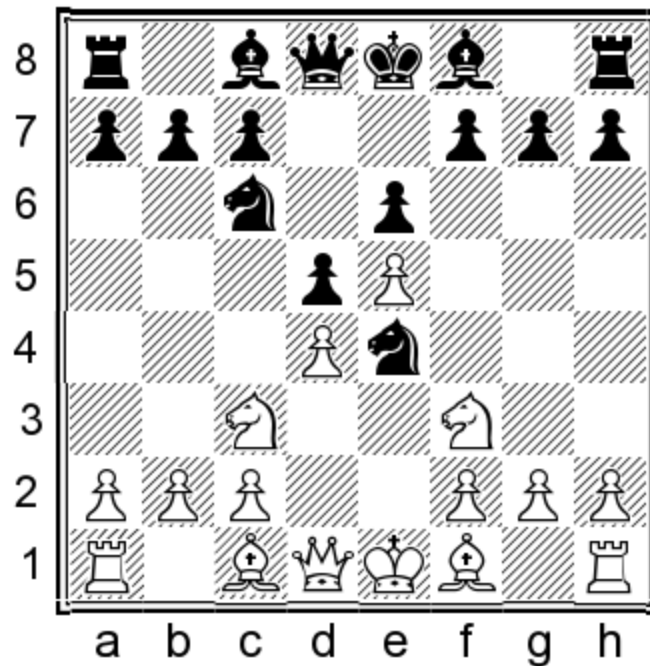
This is a serious move which has been employed by Grandmasters Jobava and Rapport. Not only when playing but also when analyzing one is often spoilt for choice. Such is the case here – I like both of the weapons I am

## 4.Nf3

## 4...Nf6 5.Bd3

**A)** 5...Nd7 makes the ...Nc6 move look a bit pointless. White can play 6.a3, preparing development of the light-squared bishop with Bd3. [6.Ne2, intending the solidifying c2-c3, is also good.]

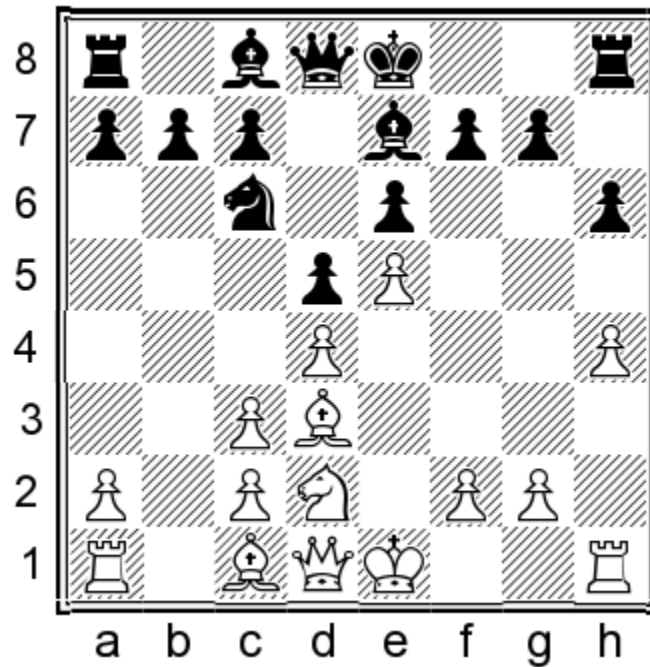
**B)** 5...Ne4 Here White has the option of choosing either a solid or a sacrificial line. I have to admit I like the calmer one here more.



*Position after: 5...Ne4*

**B1)** 6.Bd3 is the wilder move.

**B1.1)** After the cooperative 6...Nxc3 7.bxc3 Be7 8.h4 h6 9.Nd2!

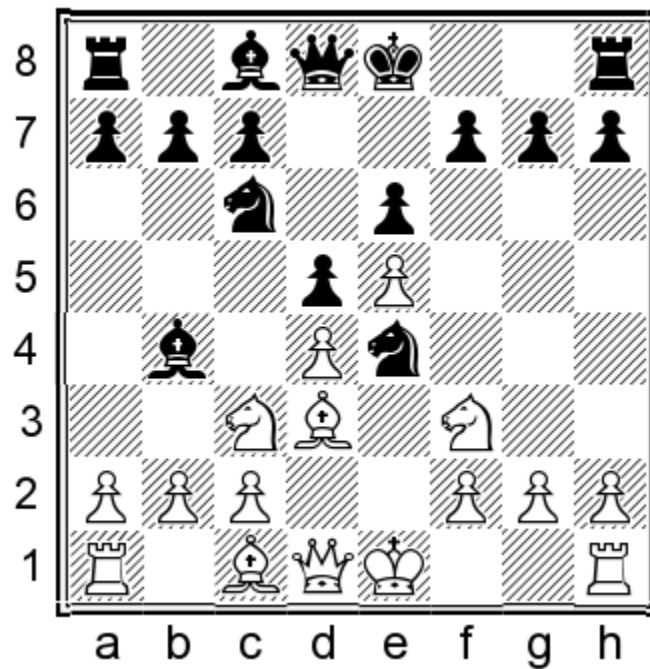


*Position after: 9.Nd2!*

White's queen joins the attack from g4. The pawn is not really hanging on h4 as if 9...Bxh4 10.Qg4 then Black has to either lose their kingside pawns after Qxg7 or their bishop after 10...g5 11.g3+-.

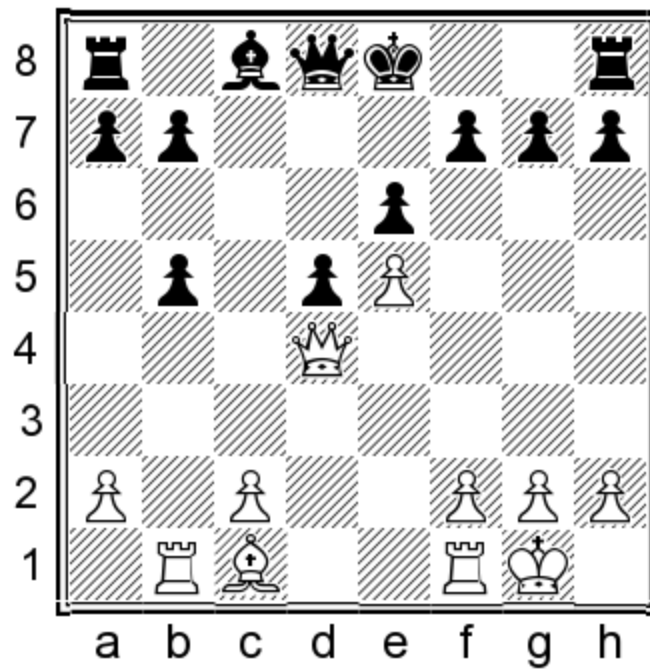
**B1.2)** 6...Bb4





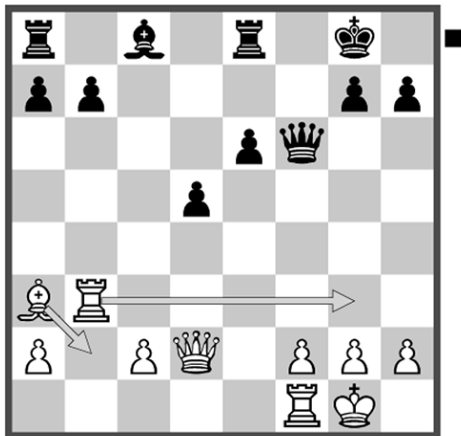
*Position after: 6...Bb4*

7.0-0 [7.Bd2 is too timid! Black gets good play with 7...Bxc3 8.bxc3 b6 9.0-0 Bb7 10.Re1 Qd7!, when sacrificing the d5-pawn turns the b7-bishop into a monstrous piece. 11.Bxe4 dxe4 12.Ng5 0-0-0 with pleasant compensation.] 7...Nxc3 8.bxc3 Bxc3 9.Rb1 Things suddenly get a little crazy. 9...Nxd4 10.Nxd4 Bxd4 11.Bb5+ c6 12.Qxd4 cxb5



*Position after: 12...cxb5*

Ultimately, White is regaining one of the sacrificed pawns and has some compensation for the other one, e.g. 13.Rxb5 [13.Ba3 is an option too but if White does not do something quickly after 13...Bd7 then they might run out of fuel and just be two pawns down.] 13...0-0 14.Ba3 Re8 15.Rb3 f5 (Black needs to get some space) 16.exf6 Qxf6 17.Qd2

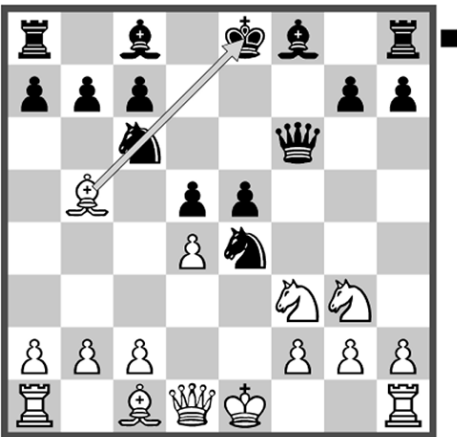


*Position after: 17.Qd2*

White has some firepower on the dark squares but I would like to have something more tangible instead. You can definitely analyze this further if you wish to, but we will focus on other set-ups.

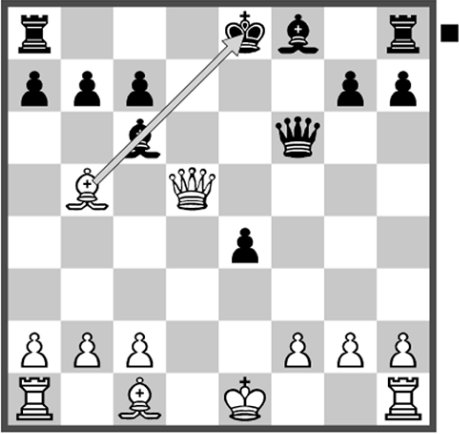
**B2) 6.Ne2 f6 7.exf6**

**B2.1) 7...Qxf6** aims for a quick opening of the center but it does not work out very well. 8.Ng3 e5 9.Bb5



*Position after: 9.Bb5*

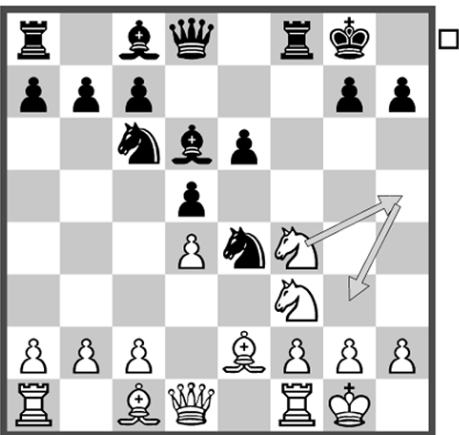
Black has to unfavorably release the tension since their c6-knight can no longer support their overextended center. 9...exd4 10.Nxe4 dxe4 11.Nxd4 Bd7 12.Nxc6 Black would like to recapture with their bishop 12...Bxc6 but it runs into 13.Qd5!



*Position after: 13.Qd5!*

utilizing the pin, when their pawn structure will be irreversibly damaged after 13...Bxb5 14.Qxb5+, as 14...c6 15.Qxb7+- is very bad news for the second player.

**B2.2)** 7...Nxf6 8.Nf4 Bd6 9.Be2 Ne4 10.0-0 0-0∞



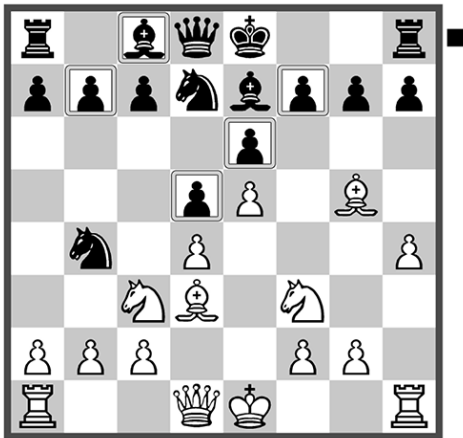
*Position after: 10...0-0∞*

Black has a pretty strong knight on e4 so the play will naturally revolve around it. There is an interesting plan of attacking it with Nh5-g3 or White can choose to simply reinforce their knight on f4 with g2-g3. In any

case the nature of the fight will be much slower. Let us now switch to the more enticing variations in our main line.

### 5...Nb4

Going after the d3-bishop with this move brings Black some discomfort, as after the moves 6.e5 Nd7 7.Bg5 Be7 8.h4

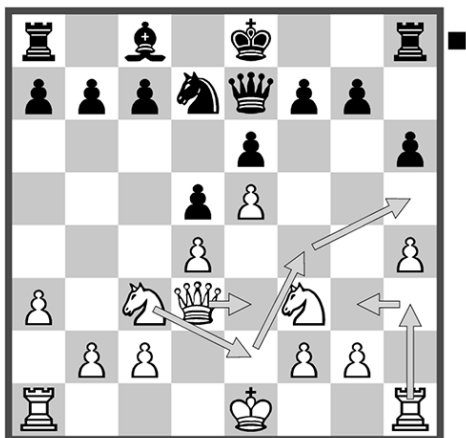


*Position after: 8.h4*

White manages to exchange their “bad” (in the sense that many white pawns are on dark squares) dark-squared bishop. Although such maneuvers are not something that should be undertaken without thinking, in this concrete position exchanges underline the hopelessness of Black’s c8-bishop.

### 8...h6 9.Bxe7 Qxe7

White has the easier game here. They can force matters on d3 with 10.a3 Nxd3+ 11.Qxd3



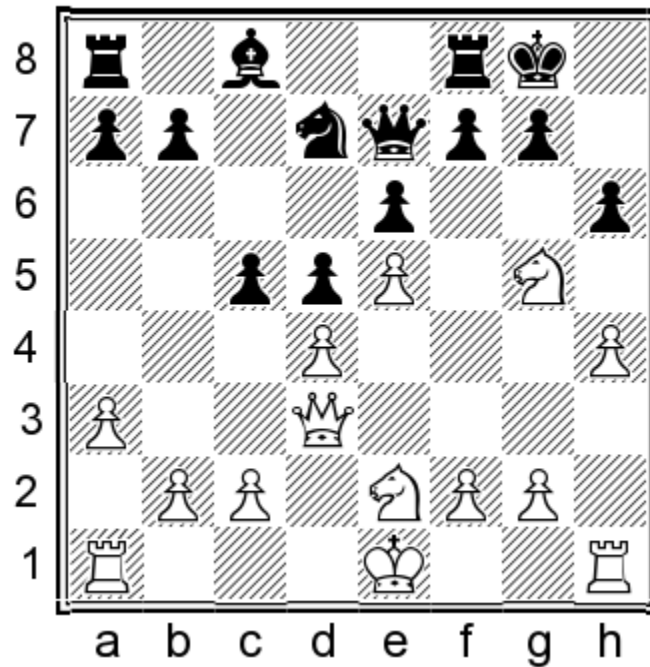
*Position after: 11.Qxd3*

and then enjoy their spatial advantage. It is not so easy for Black to get the ...c5-push in as they need to watch out for Nb5. On the other hand if they decide to hide their king by castling kingside then they will castle right into White's attack. Finally, if Black decides to keep the king in the center then White can begin to chip away at the weakness on g7 with Qe3, Rh3-g3, possibly accompanied by sending the knight to h5 via e2-f4. Note that the immediate castles kingside runs into a typical motif.

**11...0-0 12.Ne2**

A bit of preparation as the knight will come in handy on f4.

**12...c5 13.Ng5!**



*Position after: 13.Ng5!*

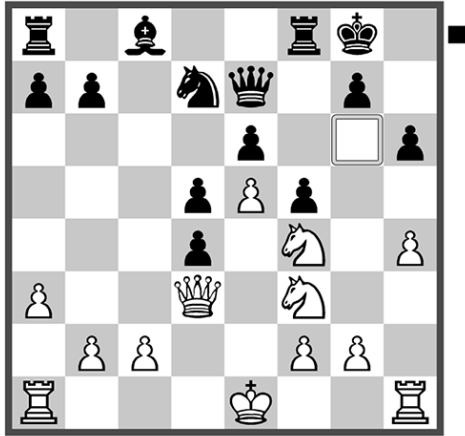
And it will be a very tough defensive task for Black.

### **13...f5**

**A)** 13...hxg5 14.hxg5 is terrible as White's attack on the kingside is unstoppable. 14...f5 15.gxf6 gxf6 16.Nf4 Qg7 17.Rh3! White has all sorts of threats such as Nxe6 or Rg3, and it would be a miracle if Black survived.

**B)** 13...g6 does not bother White too much as the threats along the h-file are not diminishing after 14.f4!.

Afterwards White can retreat their knight and continue the onslaught with either h5 or g4. 14...hxg5? 15.hxg5+- 14.Nf3 cxd4 15.Nf4±

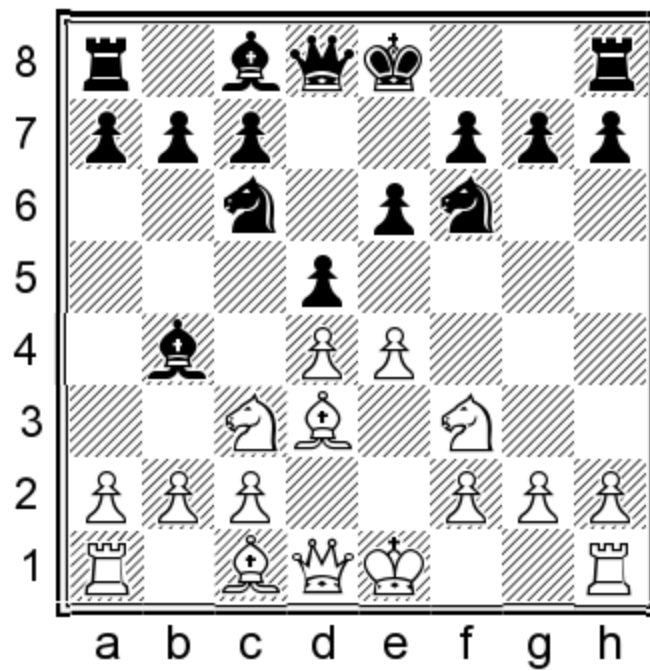


*Position after: 15.Nf4±*

Eyeing the g6-square.

**b) 5...Bb4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.Nf3 Nf6 5.Bd3 Bb4**



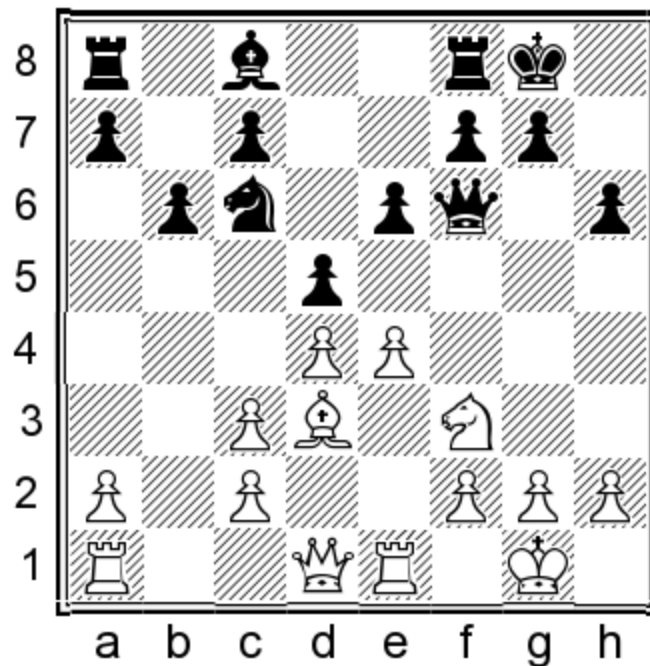
*Position after: 5...Bb4*



## 6.0-0!

This has all been played a couple of times before. White temporarily sacrifices a piece and ultimately remains a pawn down in exchange for the initiative.

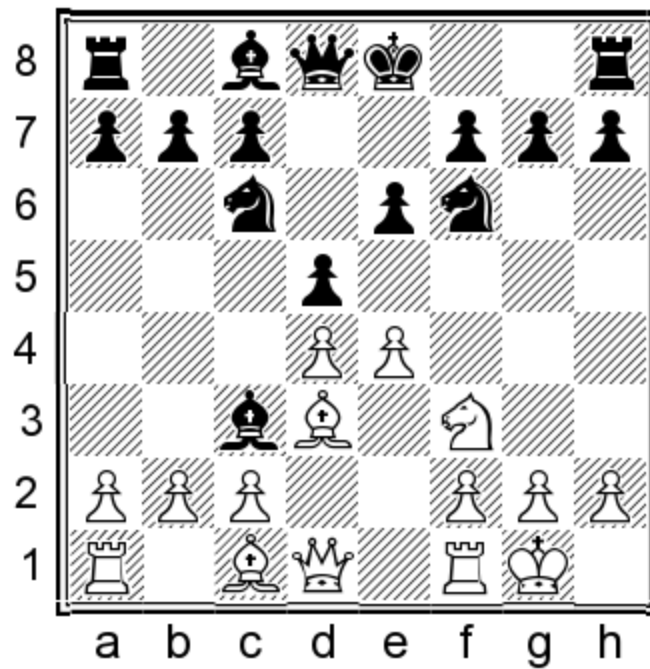
I also checked 6.Bg5 h6 7.Bxf6 Qxf6 8.0-0 Bxc3 9.bxc3 0-0 10.Re1 b6



*Position after: 10...b6*

and I tried to generate some attacking chances with 11.Re3 Bb7 12.e5 Qe7 13.Nd2 Na5 14.Qg4, however Black is in time to generate counterplay. 14...c5 15.dxc5 bxc5 16.Nb3 Nxb3 17.axb3 a5 18.Rg3 Qg5! 19.Qh3 [19.Qxg5 hxg5 20.Rxg5 Bc6 with ...a4 to follow. The rook on g5 is a little stranded.] 19...Qd2∞

## 6...Bxc3



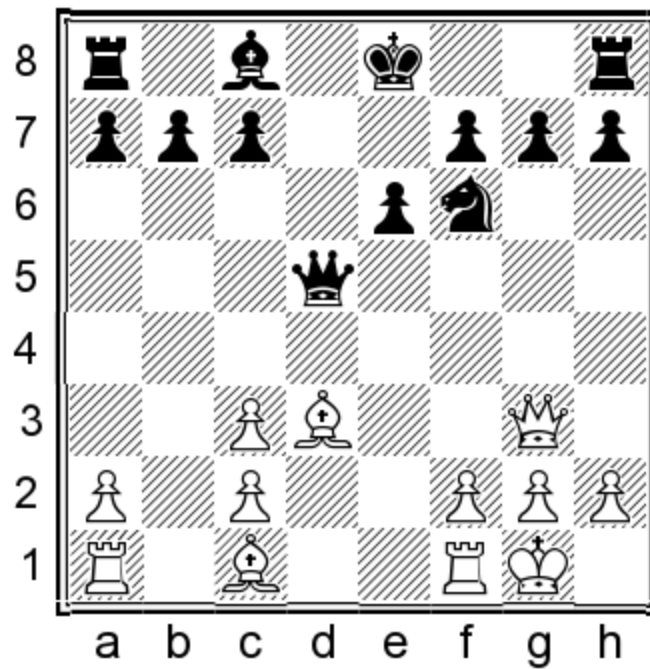
*Position after: 6...Bxc3*

**7.exd5**

This intermediary move is the point.

7.bxc3? would be a serious mistake due to 7...dxe4-+ where White loses a piece.

**7...Nxd4 8.bxc3 Nxf3+ 9.Qxf3 Qxd5 10.Qg3**



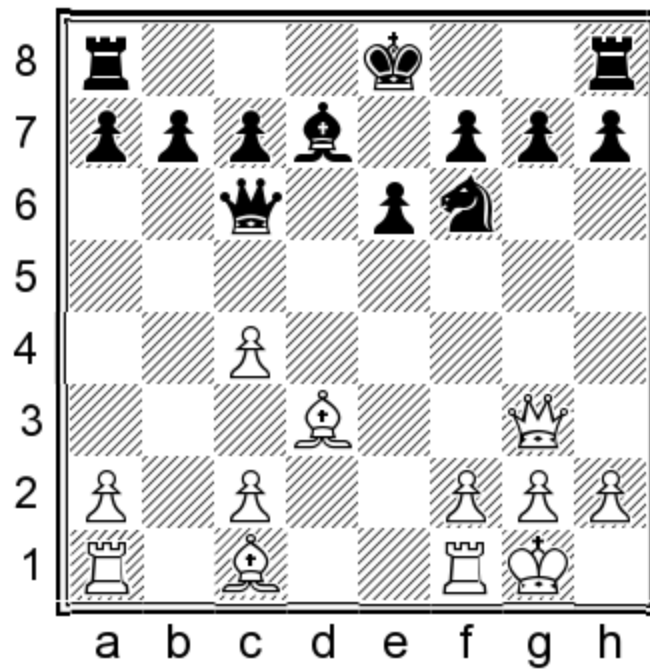
*Position after: 10.Qg3*

This is one of the critical positions that can arise after 4.Nf3. White has promising compensation for the pawn in the form of a strong bishop pair.

**10...Bd7 11.c4**

11.Qxc7 Bc6 gives Black some undesirable counterplay on the long diagonal.

**11...Qc6**



*Position after: 11...Qc6*

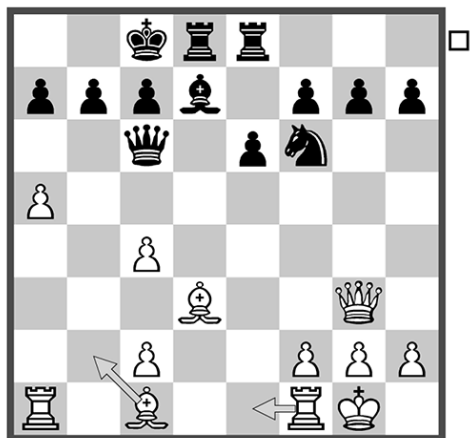
## **12.a4**

12.Rb1 0-0-0 13.Be3 h5 14.f3 Rde8 $\infty$  is another way to go, intending Rb3 and Rfb1. However the bishop might be even stronger on b2.

## **12...0-0-0 13.a5**

Just be careful not to get embarrassed by playing 13.Qxg7? Rhg8 14.Qxf6 Qxg2#.

## **13...Rhe8©**



*Position after: 13...Rhe8©*

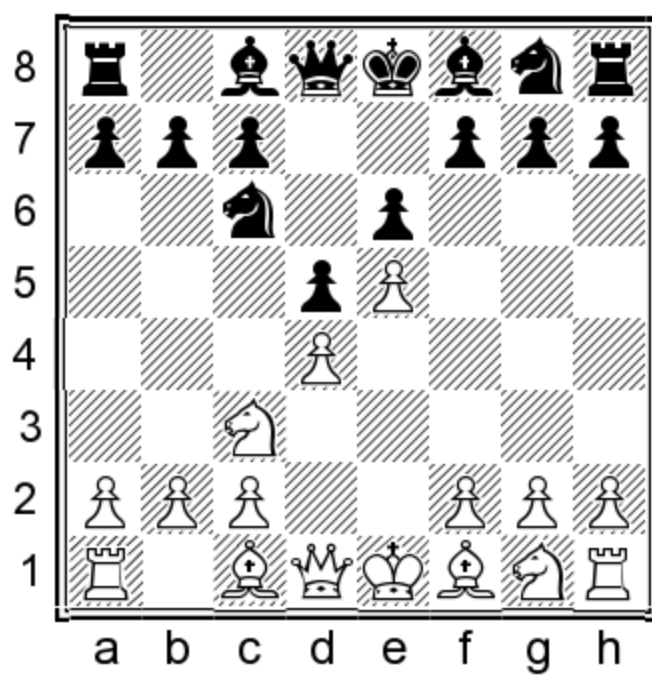
White can keep the Black plan of ...e6-e5 under control with either Bb2 or Re1.

Black's extra pawn is hard to notice at all as their position is rather cramped and White's bishops keep them under constant pressure. To be absolutely honest, if you dig deep enough then it should be possible for Black to equalize in this position, however it is far from easy to play it over the board.

# Chapter 3

## 3...Nc6 4.e5

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.e5



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 3 - 3...Nc6 4.e5

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.e5 f6

a) 5.Bb5!?

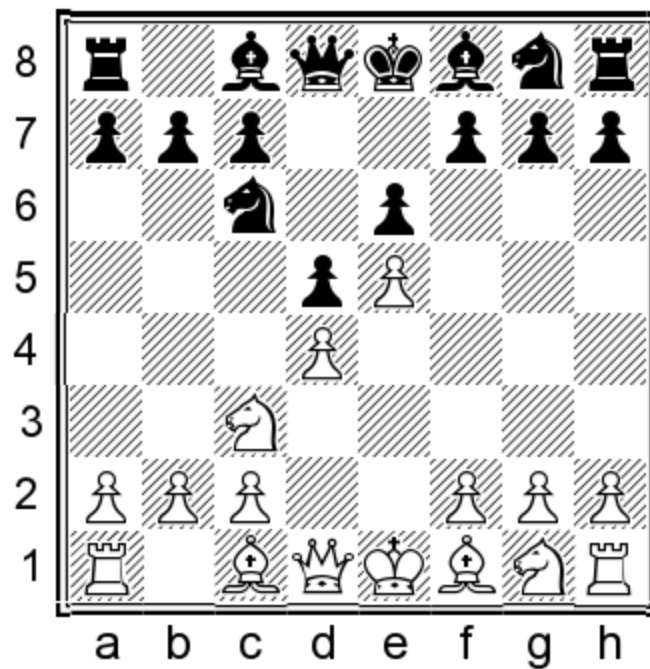
b) 5.Nf3! Bd7 6.Bd3 fxe5

c) 5.Nf3! Bd7 6.Bd3 Qe7

d) 5.Nf3! fxe5

**a) 5.Bb5!?**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.e5**

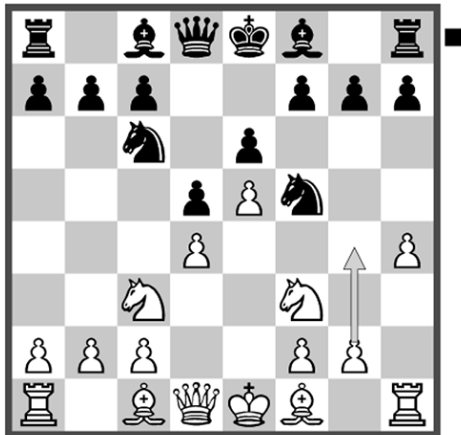


*Position after: 4.e5*

Strictly speaking, this is the most principled response, immediately trying to punish Black by making their c6-knight look as awkward as possible. If Black does not manage to make ...f6 work, their position will remain very passive.

#### 4...f6

**A)** The core of Black's set-up with ...Nc6 here is the quick ...f6 push, undermining the center, so 4...Nge7 5.Nf3 Nf5 should not bother White too much after 6.h4.

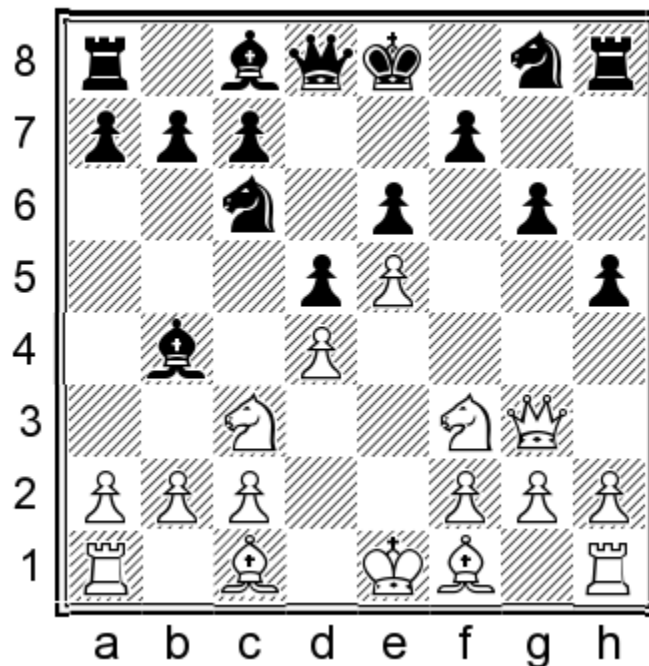


*Position after: 6.h4*

Black constantly needs to take the possibility of their knight being pushed back with g2-g4 into account.

**B)** 4...Bb4 is also troublesome for Black. Whenever ...Bb4 comes it is good to provoke ...g6 or ...Kf8 by playing 5.Qg4. Black will get some kind of a hybrid system with ...Nc6 and ...Bb4 which do not go together well. All the dark squares will be severely weakened after 5...g6 6.Nf3 h5 7.Qg3.





*Position after: 7.Qg3*

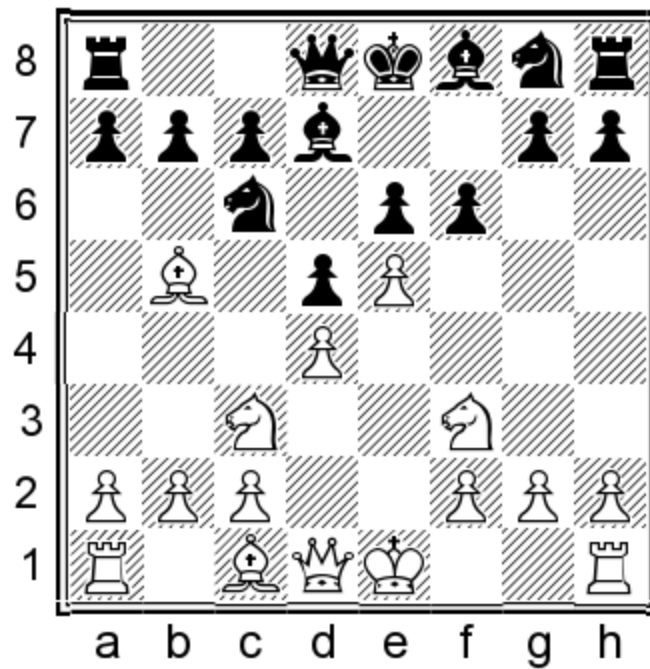
For example, play could continue 7...Nh6 8.Bg5 Be7 9.h4 Nf5 10.Qf4± and White has a very nice position. They can for example turn to the Bd3xf5 plan and then maneuver their c3-knight to f4.

**C)** 4...Bd7 cuts our options down a little bit as we need to play 5.Nf3 in order to stay in our repertoire. [5.Bb5 would look quite silly here without ...f6.] 5...f6 transposes into 4...f6 5.Nf3 Bd7.

Besides my main recommendation, 5.Nf3!, we will also explore 5.Bb5!?

Although it is not my main suggestion, it is definitely a playable alternative. The game takes a really sharp turn with the kings castling opposite sides and initiating pawn storms.

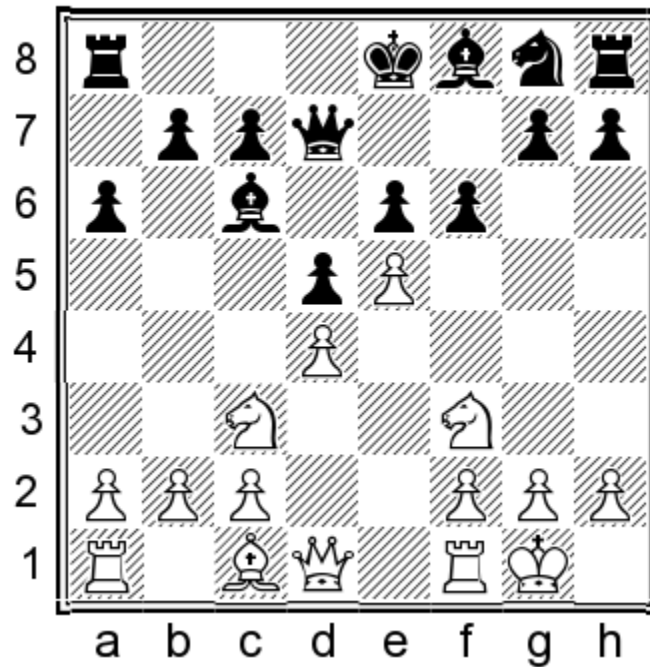
**5...Bd7 6.Nf3**



*Position after: 6.Nf3*

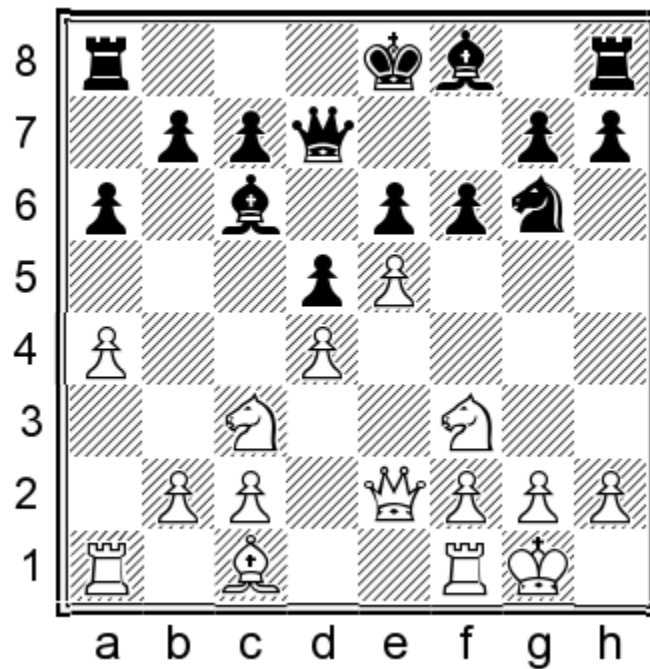
**6...Qe7**

6...a6 is another option for Black. Aiming for fast development and possibly a quick ...h6, ...f5, and ...g5 push.  
7.Bxc6 Bxc6 8.0-0 Qd7



*Position after: 8...Qd7*

**A)** 9.a4 Ne7 The knight is coming to g6 to resolve the tension on e5. [Black is a bit hesitant to commit the king with 9...0-0-0 so quickly after 9.a4, as White will be well-placed to attack with a quick b4-b5. After developing the bishop White can prepare the pawn push with either Ne1-d3 or Qb1 while their rook supports the attack from a1. 10.Bd2 f5 11.Ne1! h6 12.Nd3 g5 13.b4 and White's attack comes first.] White would ideally like to recapture with a knight on e5 but after 10.Qe2 Ng6

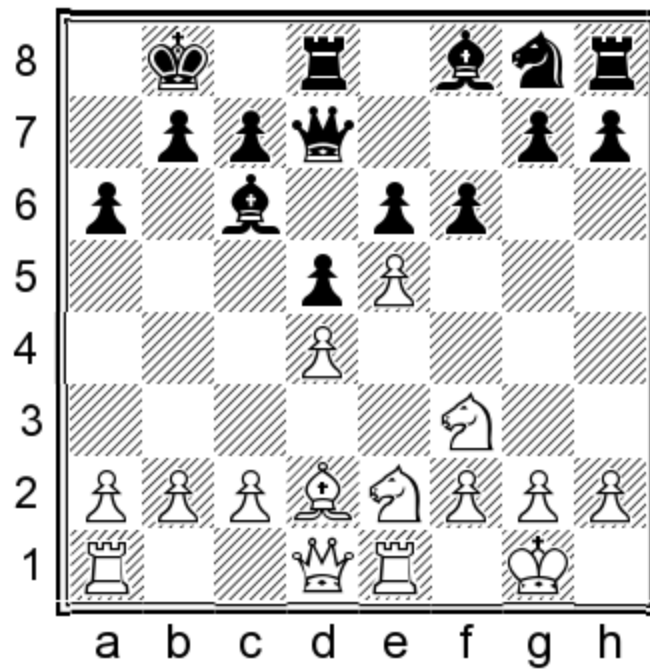


*Position after: 10...Ng6*

White's knight would be exchanged immediately. 11.exf6  
It is hard to generate pressure in a more open position as well. 11...gxf6 12.Re1 Kf7 Black will reinforce their position with ...Re8 and it does not look like they should be any worse with such great central control.

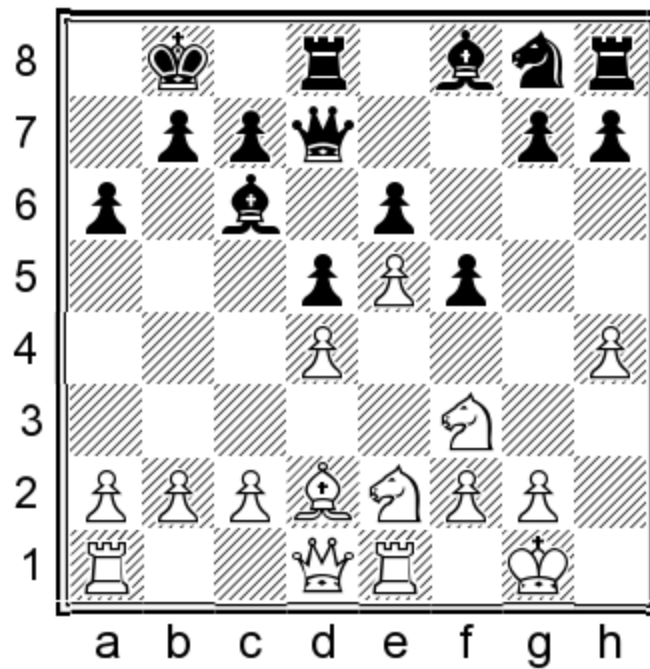
**B)** 9.Qd3 f5 [9...Ne7 In this instance the ...Ng6 plan is not so great because of 10.Re1 Ng6 11.exf6 gxf6 12.Qf5!. After 12...Kf7 White has 13.Ng5+!+- in mind.] 10.Bd2 h6  
11.Rfb1 g5 is an outcome that Black can be happy with, and the fact that Black is able to get this kind of counterplay in many variations is the main reason why 5.Nf3 is my main recommendation.

**C)** 9.Ne2 intends to relocate the knight to f4 and put more pressure on e6. It is logical that Black switches to the plan with castling queenside but the Ne2 maneuver remains quite dangerous even there. 9...0-0-0 10.Re1 Kb8 11.Bd2



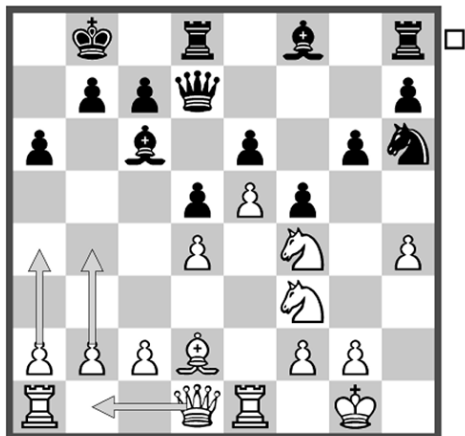
*Position after: 11.Bd2*

Eventually Black will have to state their intentions clearly. Meanwhile Bd2 would support the attack on the queenside should White get the chance to play a4 and b4. 11...f5 [11...Ne7 12.exf6 gxf6 13.Nf4 is also not ideal for Black.] 12.h4!



*Position after: 12.h4!*

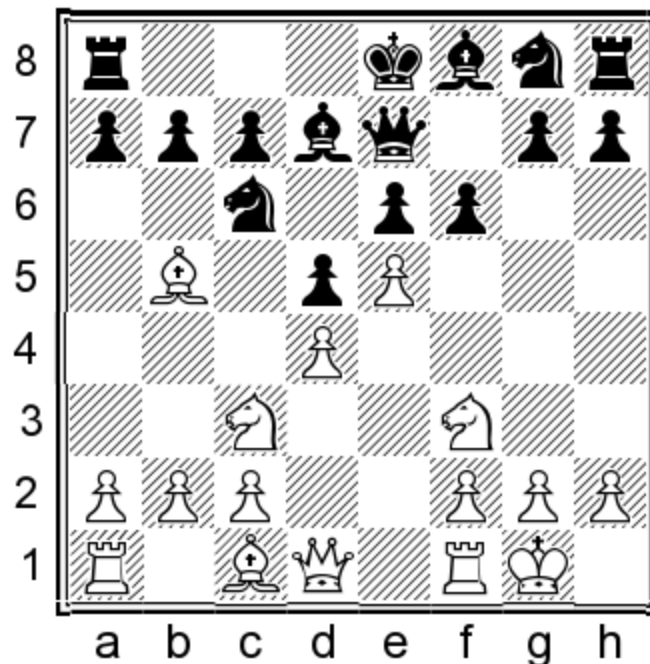
If Black were to have enough time to play ...h6 and ...g5 then White could find themselves in serious trouble. Naturally they need to stop the ...g5 advance. 12...g6 [12...Ne7 13.Nf4 Ng6 14.Nxg6 hxg6 15.g3± would be an ideal scenario in which Black's counterplay on the kingside comes to a complete halt.] 13.Nf4 Nh6



*Position after: 13...Nh6*

planning ...Nf7. It will take some more time for Black to prepare the pawn advances on the kingside so White can try to push on the other side of the board in the meantime.

## 7.0-0



*Position after: 7.0-0*

## 7...Qf7

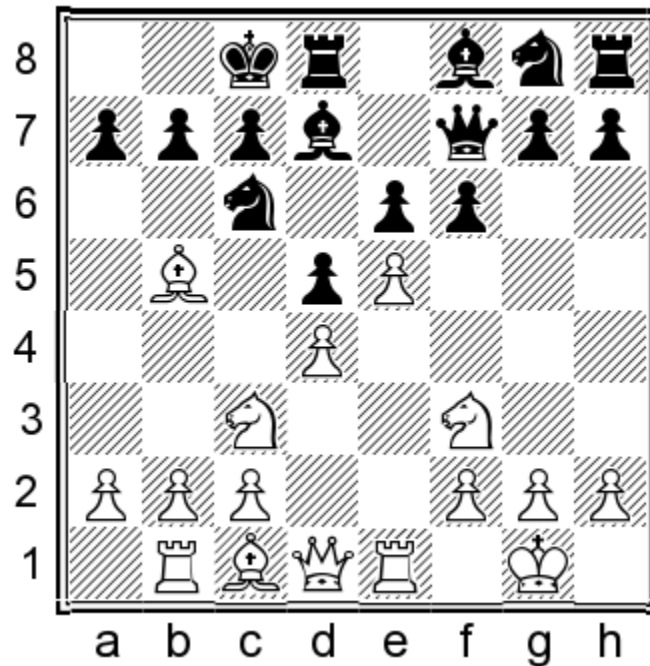
Black's plan is to counterattack on the kingside with ...h6, ...g5, and ... f5. They can also start by castling queenside.

7...0-0-0 White should once again be a bit clever and start with Rb1 or Re1 (as in the main line) if they want to try to get an advantage, as the most natural 8.a4 Qf7 9.Rb1 Nge7 10.b4 can get messy after 10...h6 and ...g5.

## 8.Re1!?

White is trying to make a useful move, waiting for Black to castle queenside before launching an attack there.

## 8...0-0-0 9.Rb1



*Position after: 9.Rb1*

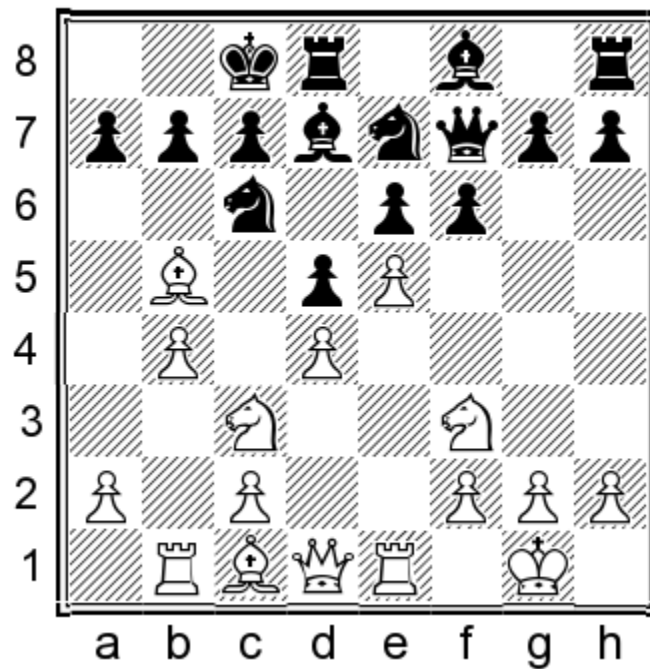
This is a more clever set-up than the blunt one with a2-a4 as that move might not be entirely needed.

## 9...Nge7

9...h6!?, once again intending ...g5, might be the way to go for Black.

## 10.b4





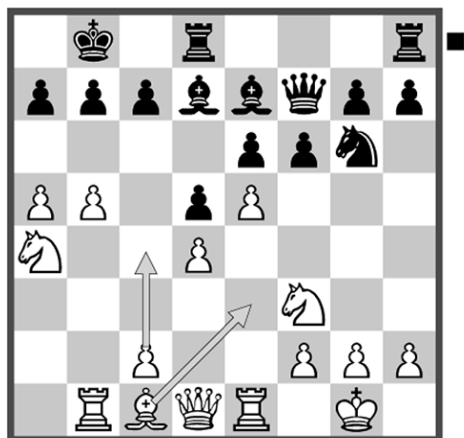
*Position after: 10.b4*

White has the idea of a quick Bf1 and b4-b5 which seems to work well in many instances.

## 10...Nf5

10...Ng6 11.Bxc6 will be very smooth for White. As there is no ...Nxc6 recapture, White's pawns just start to roll.

11...Bxc6 12.b5 Bd7 13.a4 Kb8 14.a5 Be7 15.Na4



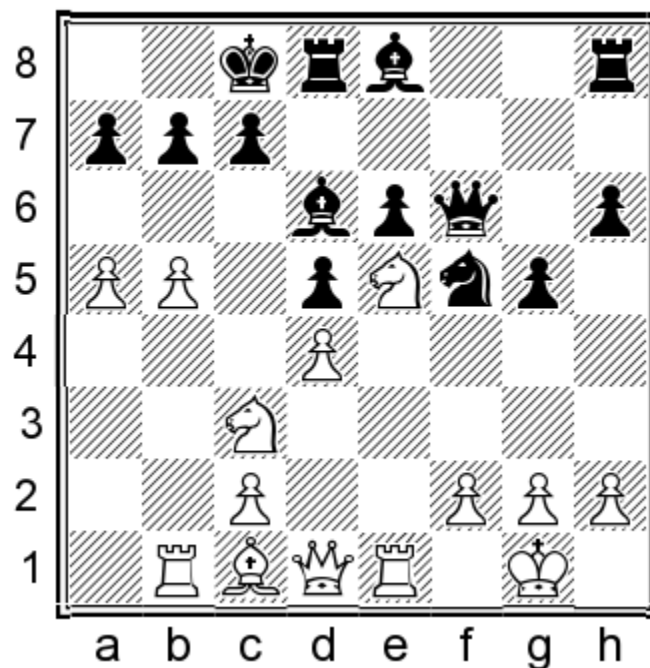
*Position after: 15.Na4*

White's attack just rolls without much counterplay for Black. White can continue the onslaught with Be3 and c2-c4, further opening the position.

**11.Bxc6 Bxc6 12.b5 Be8 13.a4**

Once again White will be faster. The plans with a knight on g6/f5 don't look very promising for Black.

**13...g5 14.exf6 h6 15.Ne5 Qxf6 16.a5 Bd6**



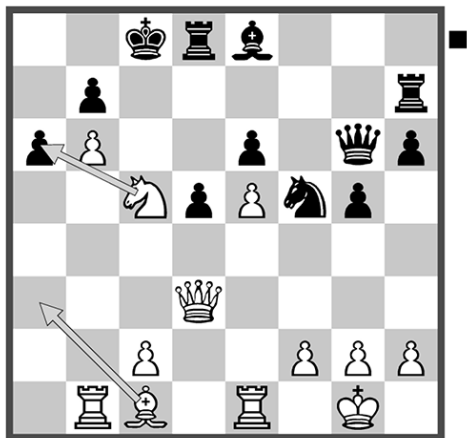
*Position after: 16...Bd6*

**17.Na4**

The knight is going to c5 in order to support White's attack there.

17.b6 is a bit premature. 17...cxb6 18.axb6 a6 and it is not so easy to break through.

**17...Bxe5 18.dxe5 Qg6 19.Nc5 Rh7 20.b6 cxb6 21.axb6 a6 22.Qd3**

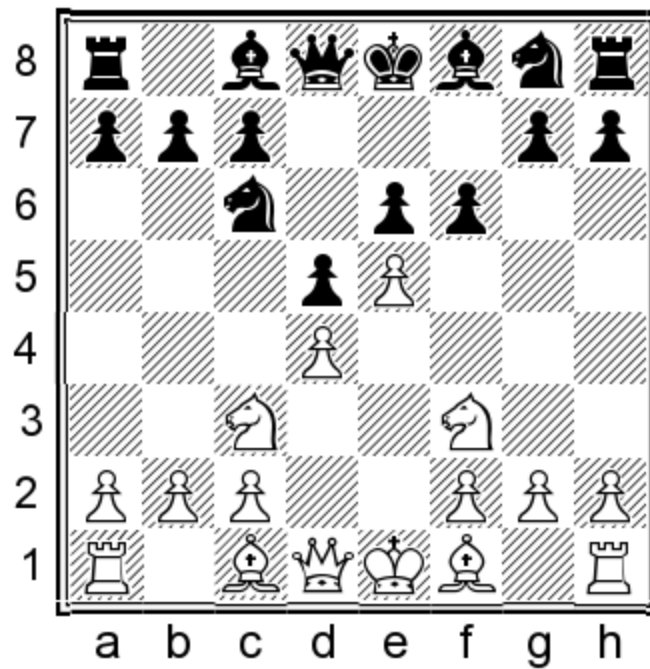


*Position after: 22.Qd3*

White will soon be threatening to take on a6 with the knight, maybe after a little more preparation with Ba3. At the same time there is no counterplay in sight for Black.

**b) 5.Nf3! Bd7 6.Bd3 fxe5**

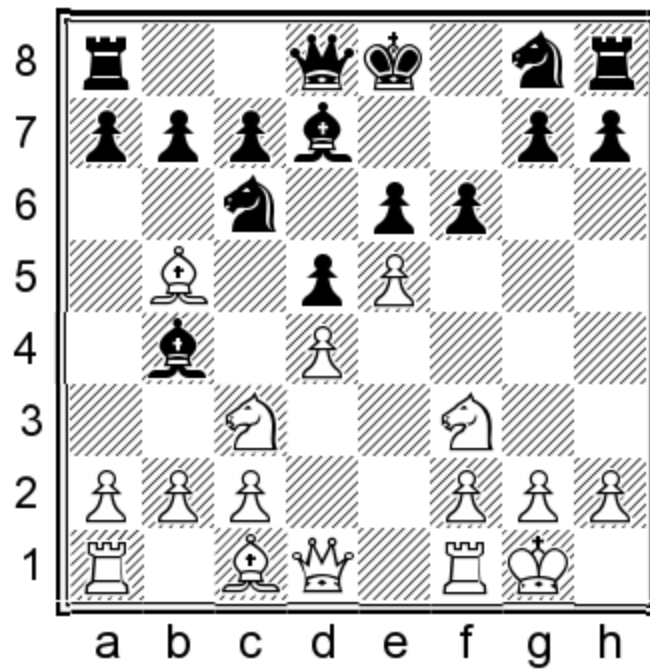
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.e5 f6 5.Nf3!**



*Position after: 5.Nf3!*

**5...Bd7**

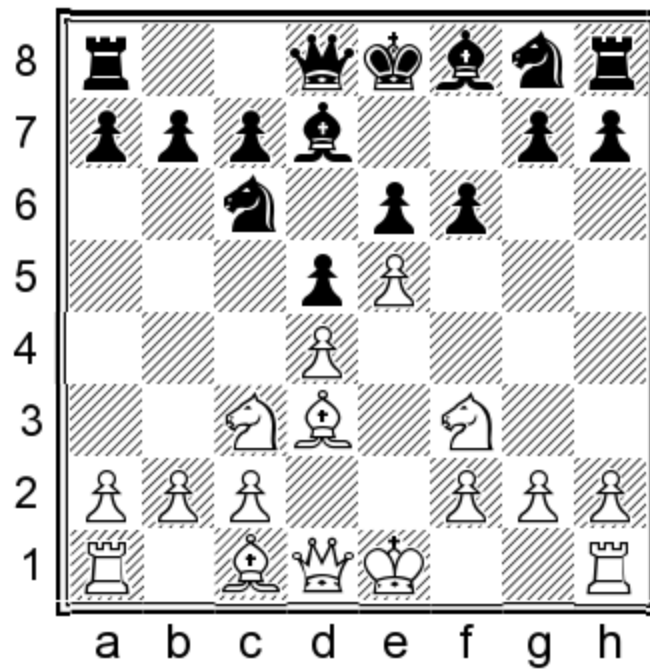
Black can keep the tension in the center by delaying ...fxe5. 5...Bb4 does not go well with ...Nc6 and ...f6. After 6.Bb5! White has a firm grip on the e5-square, keeping everything under control. 6...Bd7 7.0-0



*Position after: 7.0-0*

7...fxe5 [It can get quite spicy on the kingside after 7...Nge7 8.exf6 gxf6 9.Nh4, where White plans Bh6 and Qh5.] 8.Bxc6 Bxc6 9.Nxe5 Nf6 10.Re1<sup>2</sup> With a pleasant position for White thanks to the strong e5-outpost.

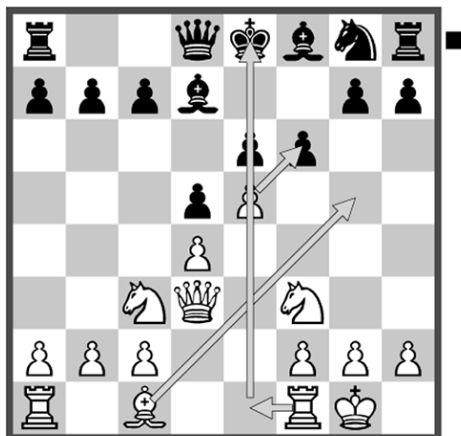
**6.Bd3**



*Position after: 6.Bd3*

**6...fxe5**

6...Nb4 7.0-0 Nxd3 8.Qxd3

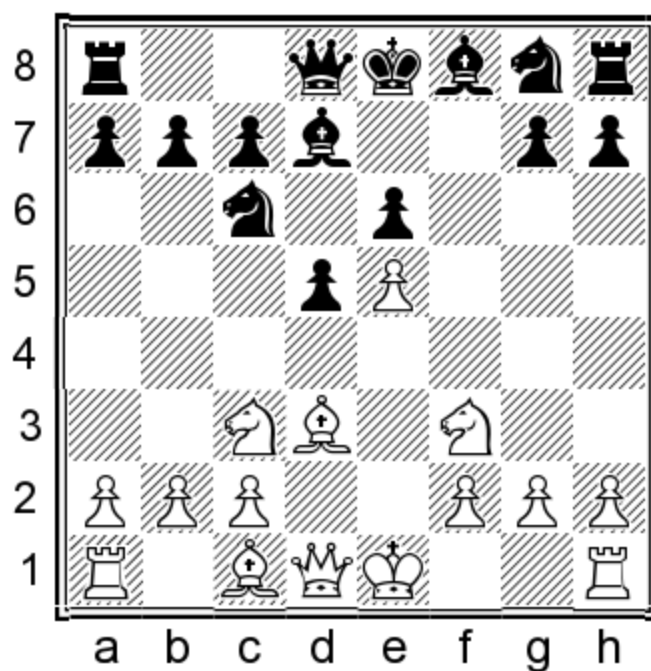


*Position after: 8.Qxd3*

I prefer White here even though Black was able to exchange their knight for White's bishop. As a rule it is

acceptable to allow the ...Nb4xd3 maneuver if White is able to get Bg5 in and exchange the dark-squared bishops, leaving Black with only the passive light-squared one. Here it can be justified by the move ...f6. Black lost a lot of time in taking White's light-squared bishop, and also left White with a means of opening the position with exf6, when Black's king might even feel some discomfort after a subsequent Re1. It is quite difficult for Black to develop normally here, e.g. 8...Qe7 9.Nb5! forces Black to some ugly concessions like taking on b5 and playing ...c6 as the c7-pawn is threatened.

## 7.dxe5

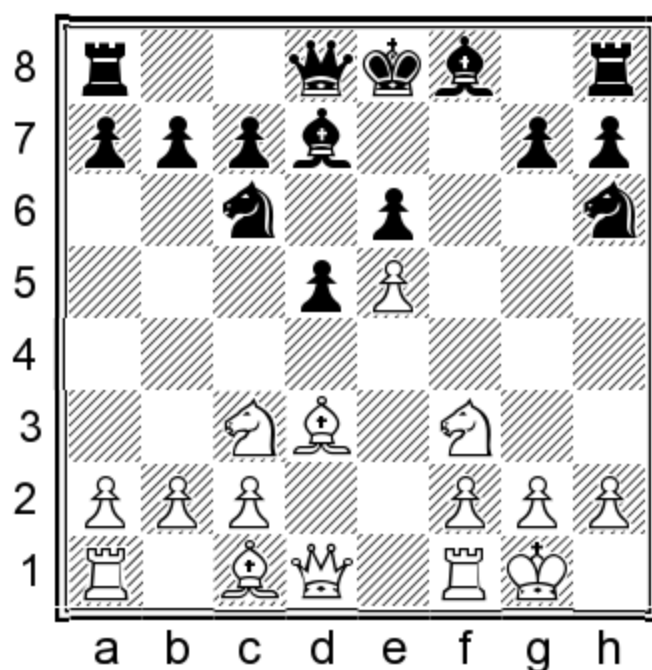


*Position after: 7.dxe5*

## 7...Nb4

This move definitely makes some sense in comparison with 6...Nb4 as after the exchange on e5 the option of Nxe5 has disappeared. But releasing the tension has other disadvantages.

Slow play does not promise Black anything special. 7...Nh6  
8.0-0

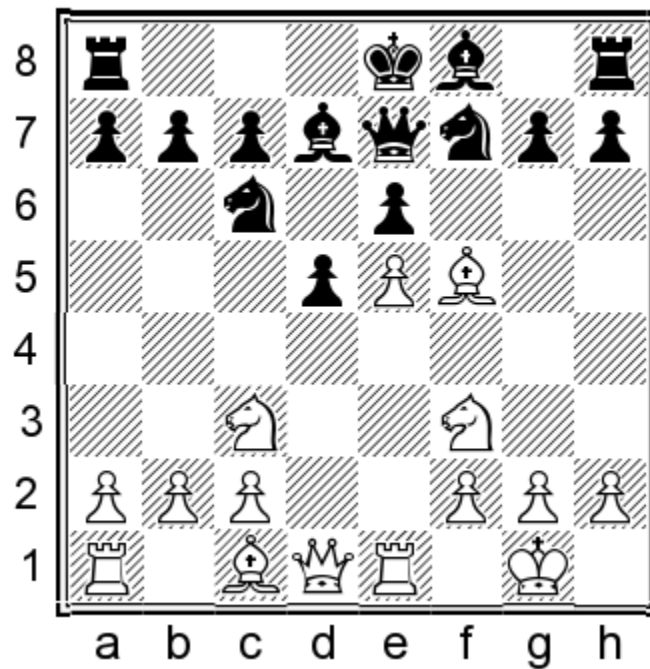


*Position after: 8.0-0*

8...Nf7 [8...Be7 is examined in notes to the main line, although White has nothing to worry about there either.]  
9.Re1

**A) 9...Qe7 10.Bf5!**



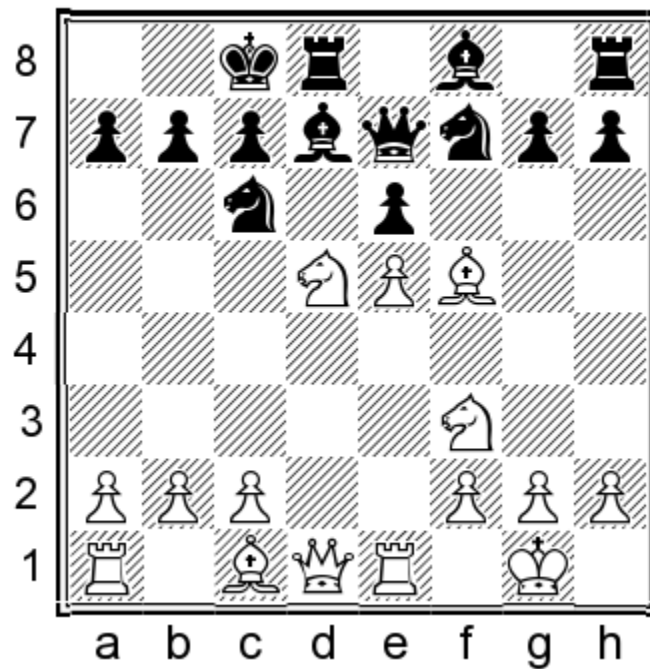


*Position after: 10.Bf5!*

A fine motif that we will see more of.

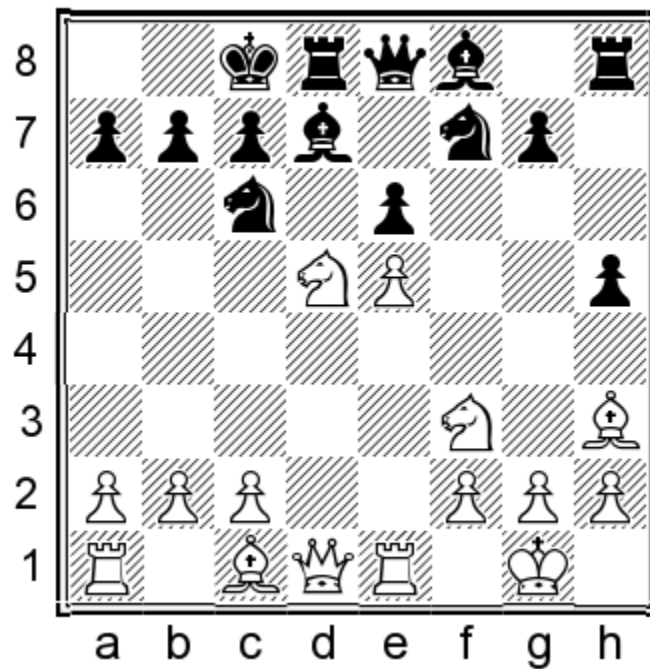
**A1)** The point is that after 10...exf5 11.Nxd5 Black's queen has to go back due to the threat of Nxc7 and after 11...Qd8 12.e6+- White gets the sacrificed piece back immediately and their attack is already very nearly decisive.

**A2)** 10...0-0-0 11.Nxd5!



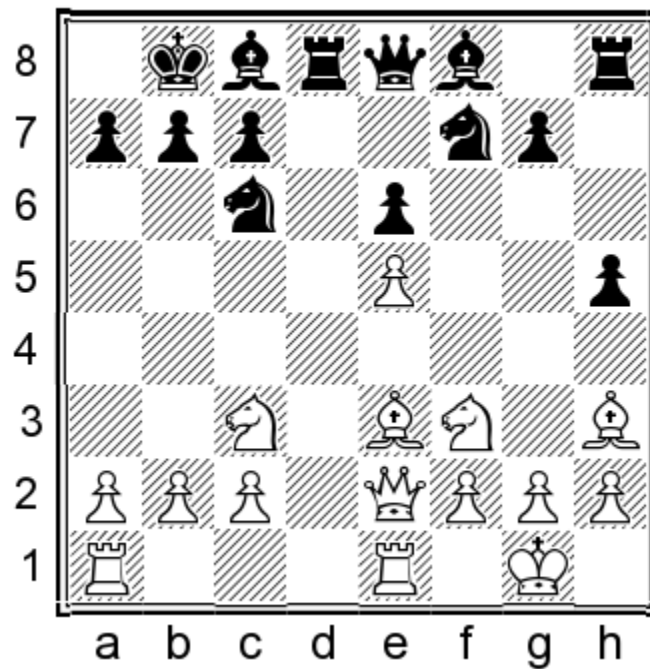
*Position after: 11.Nxd5!*

There will be no relief for Black. Once again utilizing the e5-pawn's potential. 11...Qe8 [11...exd5 12.e6+-] 12.Bh3 h5 This is actually a rather clever move. White intends to move the d5-knight to f4 and the last move of Black indirectly prevents it. [12...exd5 13.e6+- works nicely as always.]



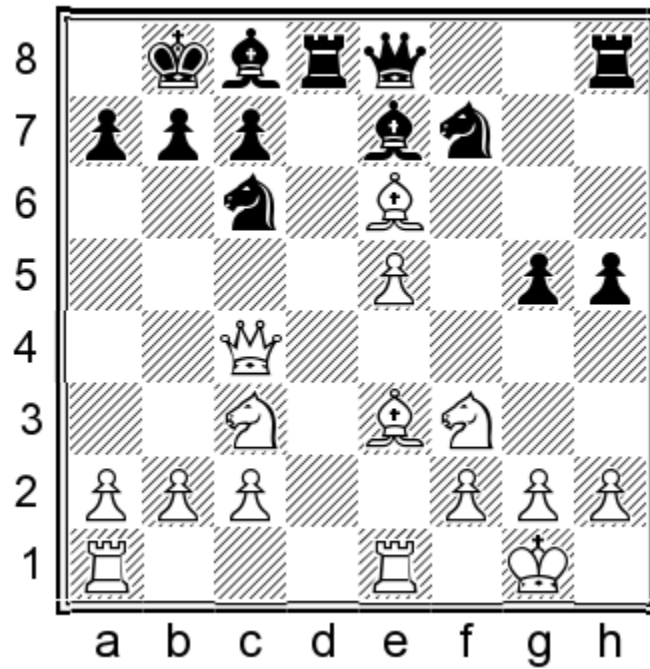
*Position after: 12...h5*

13.Be3 [13.Nf4? g5!µ is the point. Now the f4-knight does not have the h5-square and ...g4 is a threat.] 13...Kb8 threatening to retreat the bishop. [13...exd5 14.e6 is still there: 14...Bxe6 15.Bg5 Rd6 16.Rxe6! Rxe6 17.Qxd5 Ncd8 18.Re1± and White takes the material back with interest.] 14.Qe2 Bc8 [14...exd5 now does not work due to another nasty little trick. 15.e6 Bxe6 16.Bxe6 Qxe6 17.Bxa7+!, making use of the discovered attack.] 15.Nc3



*Position after: 15.Nc3*

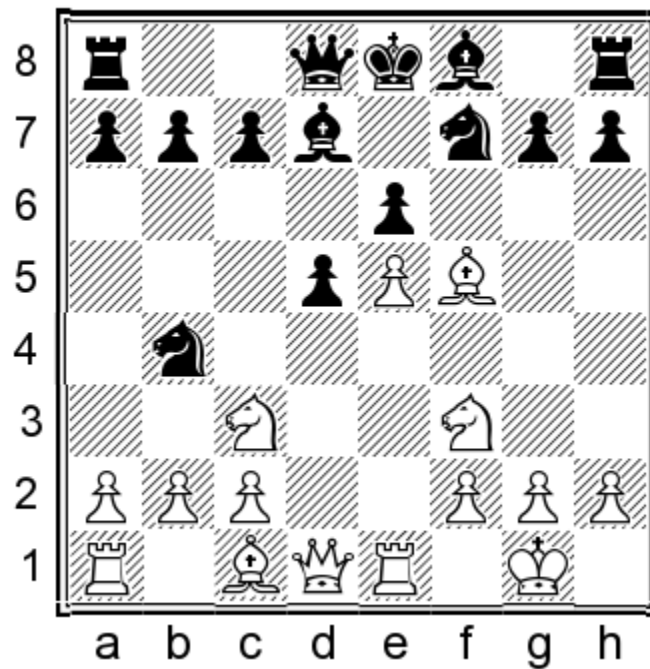
Finally White has managed to untangle their pieces and they will remain a pawn up. 15...Be7 [15...Nfxe5 16.Nxe5 Nxe5 does not really work because White can either take a pawn with Bxa7+ or an exchange with Bg5. It's up to you!] 16.Qc4 g5 17.Bxe6



*Position after: 17.Bxe6*

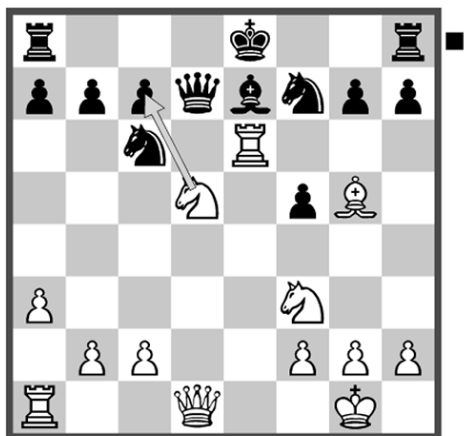
17...Nfxe5? 18.Nxe5 Nxe5 19.Bxa7+! Kxa7 20.Nb5+-  
and Black will succumb to White's attack, e.g. 20...Kb6  
21.Qxc7+ Kxb5 22.Rxe5+ with mate to follow.

**B) 9...Nb4 10.Bf5!**



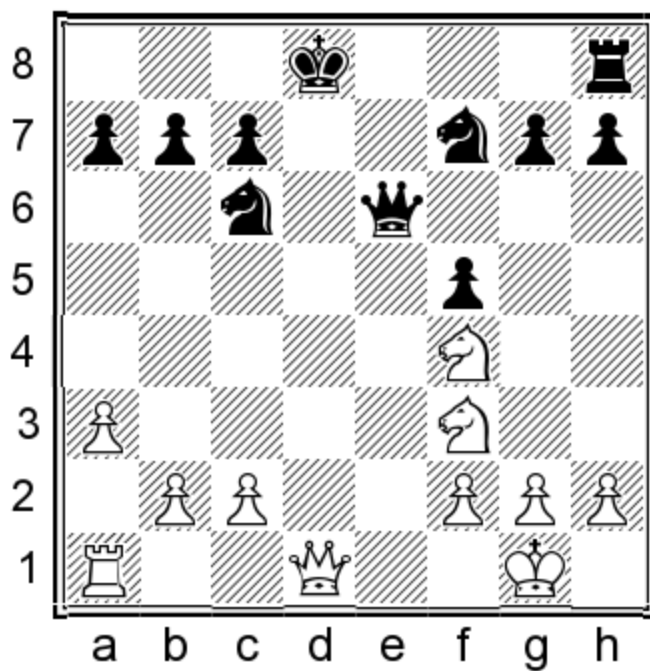
*Position after: 10.Bf5!*

A true fighter would be ashamed to retreat to e2 or f1.  
 10...Be7 [10...exf5 11.e6+- is great for White. They can actually force their way through the center even if Black does not take on f5; 10...Qe7 11.a3 Nc6 12.Nxd5!+- is even worse for Black as White just blasts through.] 11.a3 First removing a defender of the d5-square. 11...Nc6 12.Nxd5! And White crashes through again. 12...exf5 13.e6 Bxe6 14.Rxe6 The fireworks are not over yet but White will ultimately be able to claim a sizeable edge. 14...Qd7 15.Bg5!



*Position after: 15.Bg5!*

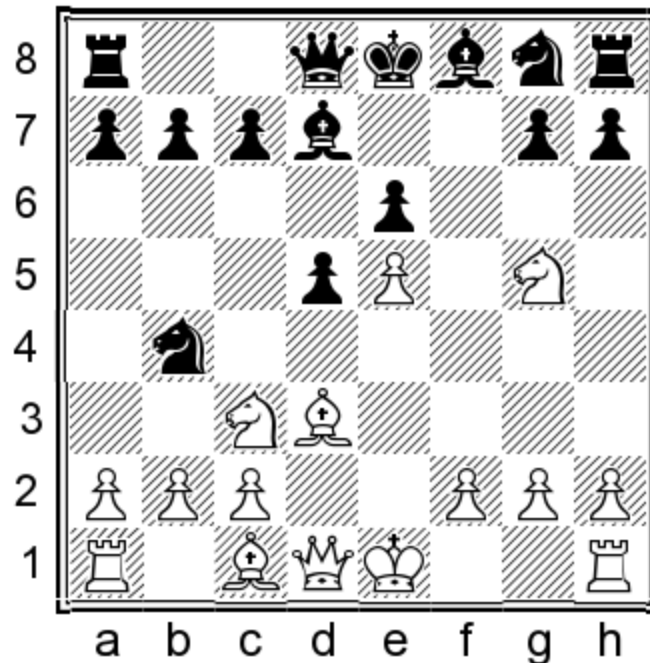
The rook on e6 is taboo thanks to the knight fork on c7.  
 15...Rd8 16.Bxe7! A bit of precision is needed of course  
 but White will resurface with an extra pawn. 16...Qxe6  
 [16...Nxe7 17.Qe2!+- is just bad] 17.Bxd8 Kxd8  
 [17...Ncxd8? 18.Nxc7++-] 18.Nf4+



*Position after: 18.Nf4+*

18...Qd6 [18...Qd7 19.Ne6+ and White picks up on g7.]  
 19.Qxd6+ Nxd6 20.Ne6+ Kc8 21.Nxg7± White's position is  
 on the verge of winning.

## 8.Ng5!



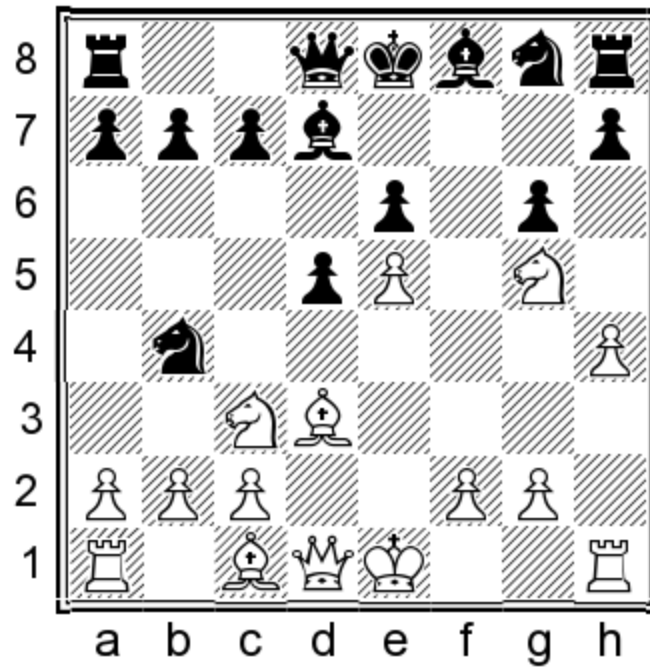
*Position after: 8.Ng5!*

This is one of the drawbacks of ...fxe5. The g5-square is not protected by the pawn anymore.

## 8...Nxd3+

After 8...g6 the logical thing to do is 9.h4!, attacking the weakened kingside. [9.Nxh7 Nxd3+ 10.Qxd3 Rxh7 11.Qxg6+ Rf7 12.Qxg8 is not so great just yet as Black can play 12...Qh4 and try to argue that their position is not completely lacking options for counterplay.]



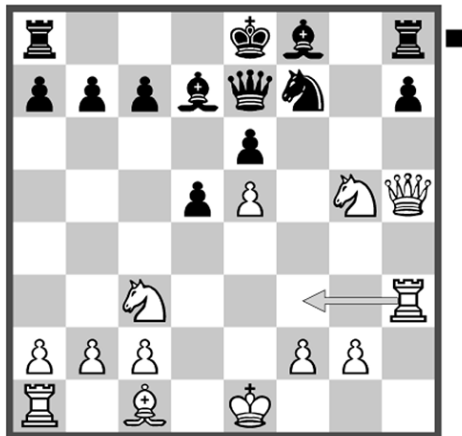


*Position after: 9.h4!*

9...Nxd3+ [9...Be7 10.Nxh7! Now this idea works perfectly as after 10...Nxd3+ 11.Qxd3 Rxh7 12.Qxg6+ Black is unable to defend everything and Qxg8 comes with check.]

10.Qxd3 Qe7 11.h5 Very simple, yet effective chess.

11...gxh5 12.Qf3 Nh6 [12...0-0-0 is desirable yet unavailable here due to 13.Nf7±, winning an exchange.] 13.Qxh5+ Nf7 14.Rh3!



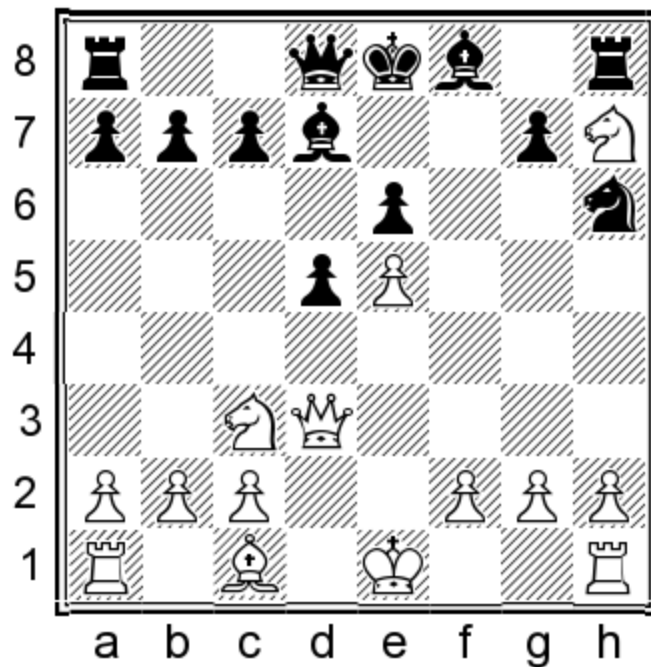
*Position after: 14.Rh3!*

Now Rf3, threatening to take the paralyzed knight, is a killer. 14...h6 15.Qg6! Due to the dominating White queen on g6, and the e8-g6 pin Black does not have any sensible moves, so they might as well part with their rook straight away. If they don't do anything, White simply completes development with Bd2, 0-0-0, and Rdh1, and only then Rf3. [15.Rf3?? hxg5-+ is the last trick to watch out for!]  
15...hxg5 16.Rxh8± White is an exchange up and Black has little compensation.

## 9.Qxd3 Nh6

9...g6 10.h4 transposes into the note to 8...g6.

## 10.Nxh7!



*Position after: 10.Nxh7!*

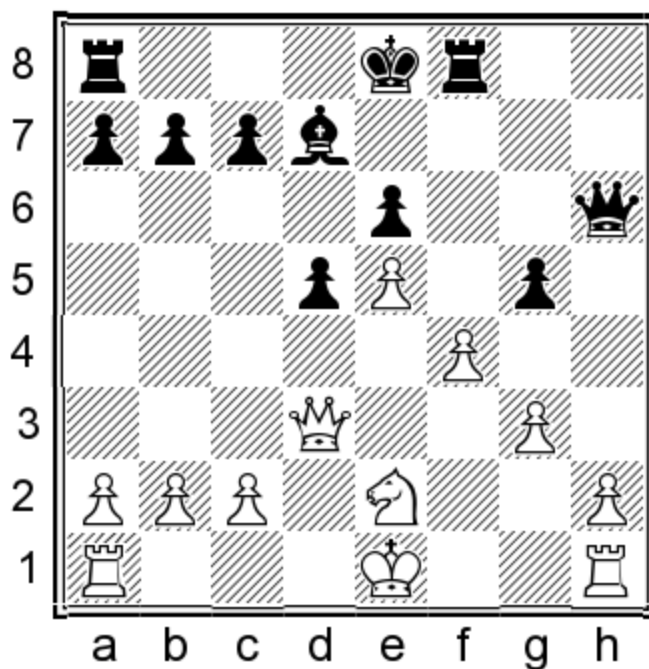
White will just pocket a pawn and then consolidate their position.

**10...Qh4 11.Nxf8 Rxf8 12.g3 Qh5 13.Bxh6 Qxh6 14.f4**

And White will complete development by castling queenside either on the next move or after solidifying the defense of the f4-pawn.

**14...g5 15.Ne2±**

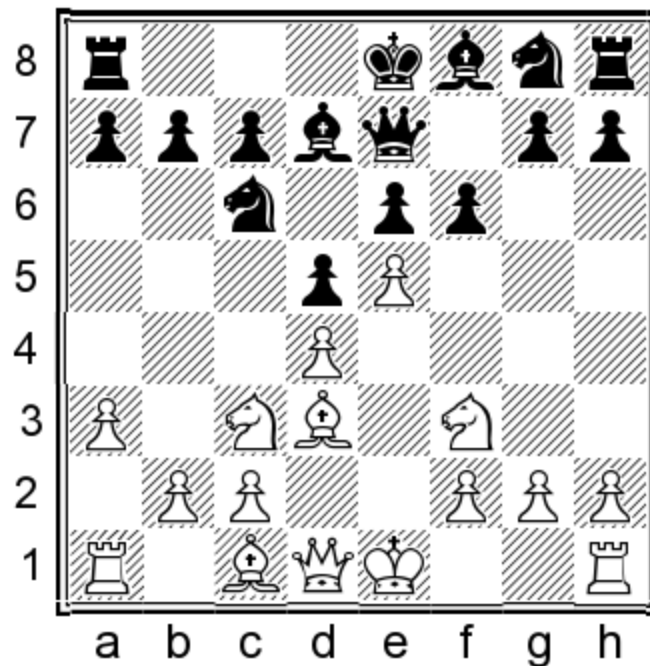
Here White has a clear advantage as there is not much Black has in return for the material deficit.



*Position after: 15.Ne2±*

**c) 5.Nf3! Bd7 6.Bd3 Qe7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.e5 f6 5.Nf3! Bd7 6.Bd3 Qe7 7.a3**

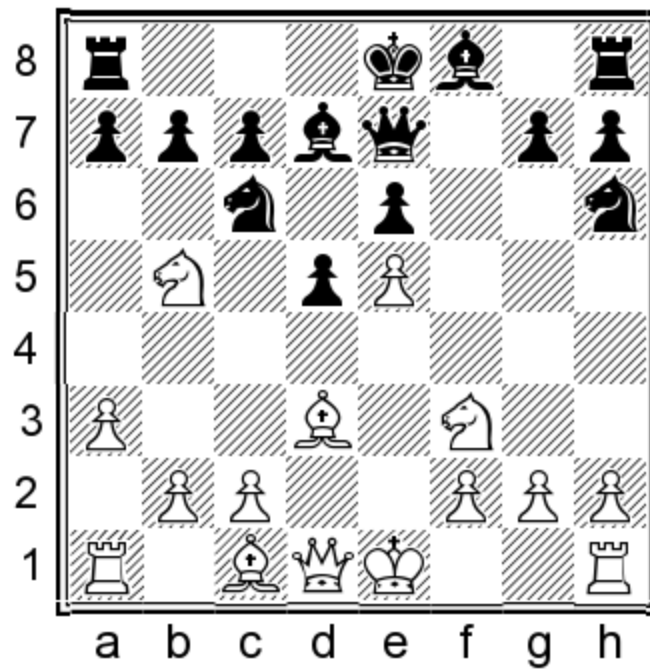


*Position after: 7.a3*

As Black made their intentions of castling queenside clear, White is now readying the forces to attack the black king with a possible b2-b4-b5.

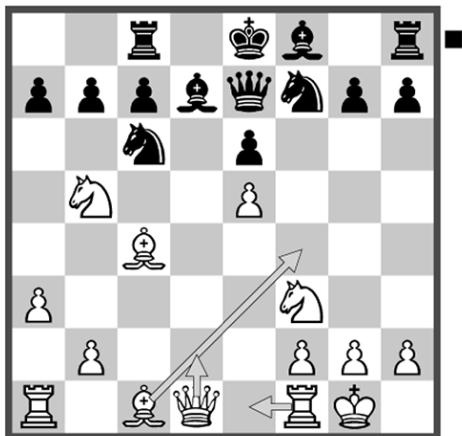
### **7...Nh6**

7...fxe5 8.dxe5 Black includes this exchange early in order to stop all ...fxe5 Nxe5 ideas for White in the future. But as always the weakened g5-square will be a big source of trouble for them. 8...Nh6 9.Nb5!



*Position after: 9.Nb5!*

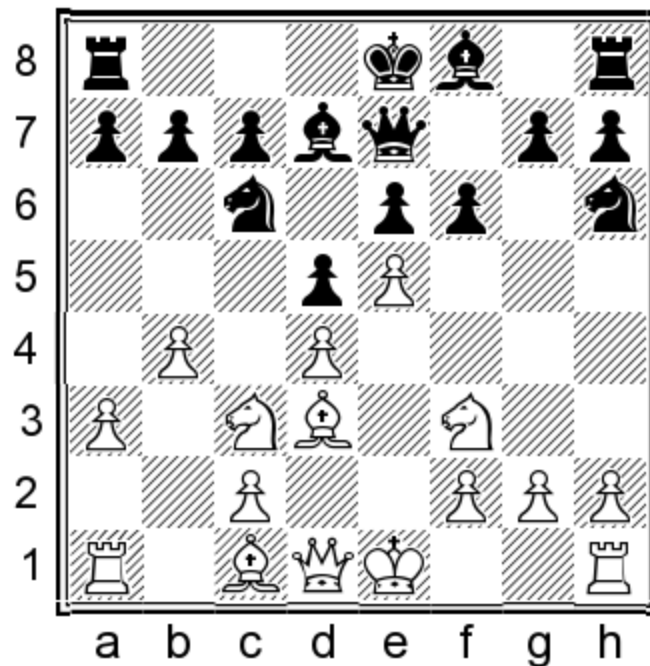
This simple move is very effective as it forces Black to forget about castling queenside due to the Bg5 skewer. 9...Rc8 [9...0-0-0? 10.Bg5± wins the d8-rook.] 10.c4! As Black's king is stuck in the center it makes a lot of sense to gain more space and to open the position even more. 10...dxc4 11.Bxc4 Nf7 12.0-0



*Position after: 12.0-0*

Black's position is rather cramped and White can continue their development with Bf4/e3, Re1, Qd2 and Rad1, enjoying their spatial advantage and greater piece activity.

**8.b4!**



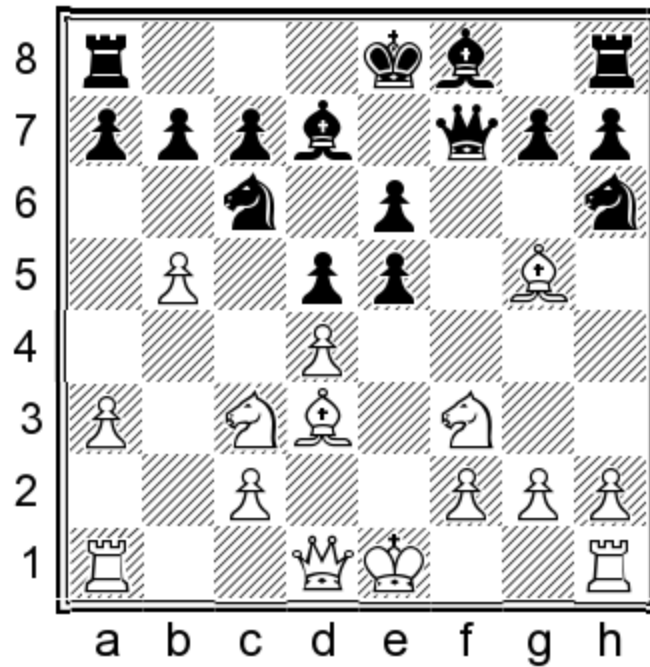
*Position after: 8.b4!*

It is also important to have the b4-b5 option in reserve.

Now 8.Nb5 does not make sense as White does not have Bg5 after 8...0-0-0 since the pawn is still on f6.

**8...0-0-0**

8...fxe5 9.Bg5! [Just don't allow 9.dxe5 Nf7 which stops Bg5, and White may even get into trouble after ...g5.]  
9...Qf7 [9...Qd6 10.Nb5 traps the queen!] 10.b5!



*Position after: 10.b5!*

White's knight is coming to e5 with a decisive effect. Here Black can certainly regret not including the exchange on e5 earlier. 10...Nxd4 11.Nxe5 Qg8 12.Bxh6 gxh6 13.Qh5+ Kd8 14.Qh4+!+-, picking up the stranded knight.

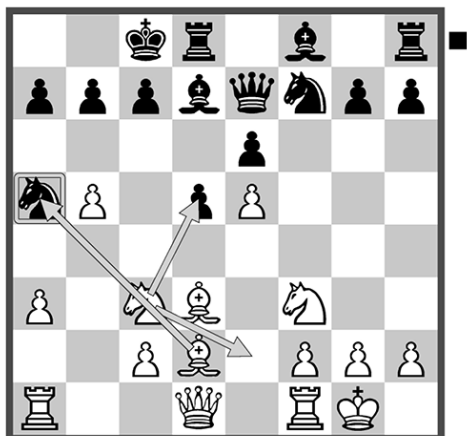
### **9.0-0 Nf7**

Now ...fxe5 is a threat, but White is well placed to deal with it.

9...fxe5 10.Bg5± is still there.

### **10.b5! Na5 11.Bd2**

Now Nxd5, winning a pawn thanks to the loose a5-knight, is a threat and 11...fxe5 12.dxe5±



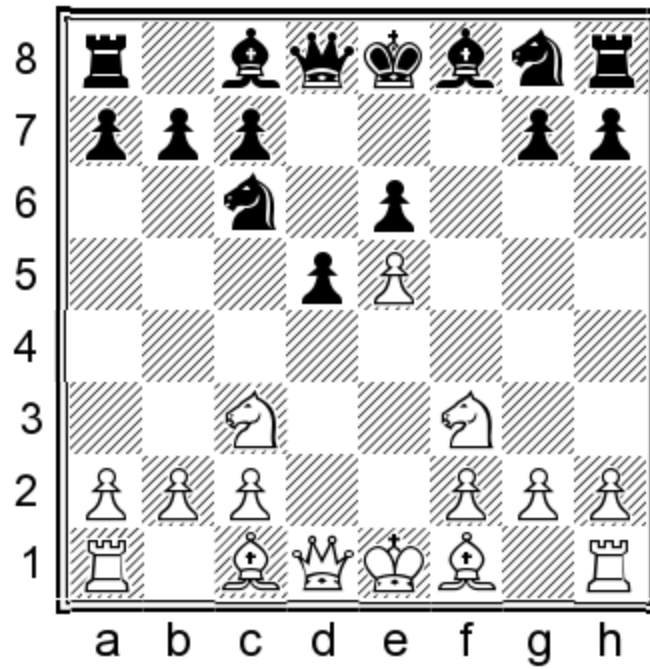
*Position after: 12.dxe5±*

does not change much. The knight might be in trouble even after something simple like Ne2 and Black is naturally hesitating to play ...b6 as it would weaken their queenside permanently.

**d) 5.Nf3! fxe5**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.e5 f6 5.Nf3! fxe5 6.dxe5**

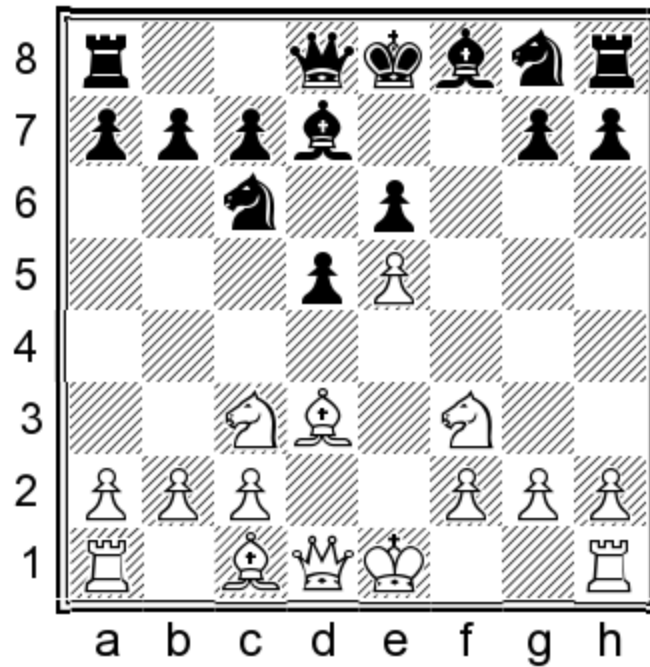




*Position after: 6.dxe5*

### **6...Nh6**

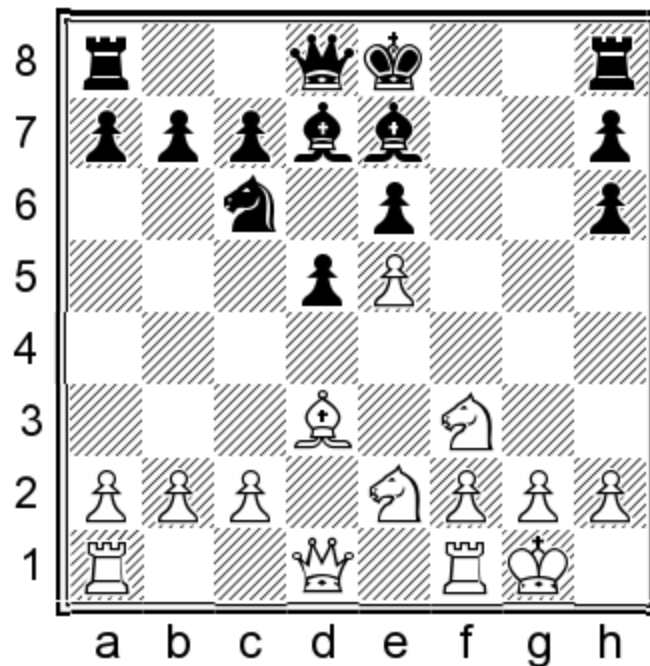
After 6...Bd7 Black will be unable to develop smoothly. We simply continue our development with the natural 7.Bd3.



*Position after: 7.Bd3*

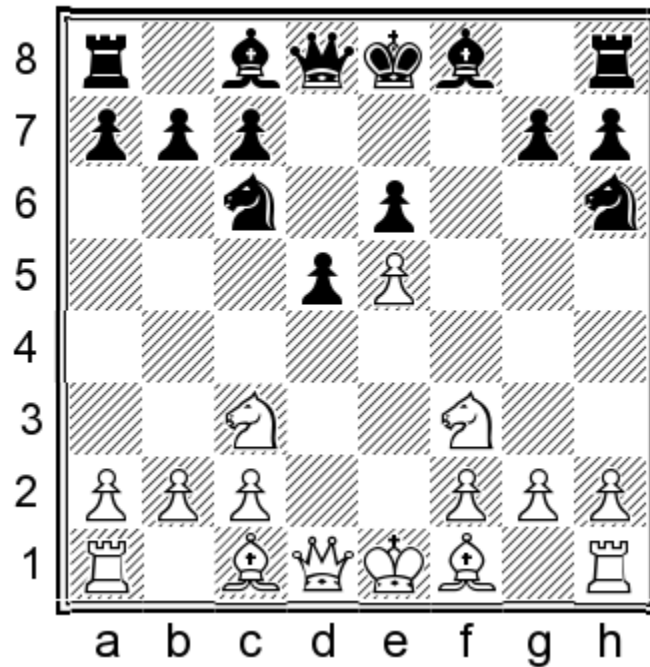
**A)** 7...Qe7 Without the inclusion of ...fxe5, dxe5 we opted for the waiting move a3. In this move-order, we don't even need to transpose as there is an even stronger continuation, thanks to the Bg5 trick. 8.Nb5! Black has serious issues covering the c7-pawn. The biggest problem is that 8...0-0-0 [8...Rc8 9.0-0 also looks very strange for Black. They have managed to defend the c7-pawn but have lost the right to castle queenside.] 9.Bg5 wins an exchange immediately.

**B)** 7...Nh6 8.0-0 Be7 [We can come to 8...Nf7 from the line with 5...Bd7, where the position after 9.Re1 is thoroughly examined.] 9.Bxh6 gxh6 10.Ne2



*Position after: 10.Ne2*

En route to the weak h5-square. Keep it simple. 10...0-0  
 11.Ng3 [11.Qd2 is suggested by my engine but I don't like  
 the complications after 11...Rxf3 12.gxf3 Nxe5 13.Qxh6  
 Nxd3 14.cxd3 Qf8 15.Qe3 c5 16.Kh1] 11...Qe8 12.c4 Once  
 again gaining space – White will further develop with Rc1  
 and Re1 with a nice grip on the position.

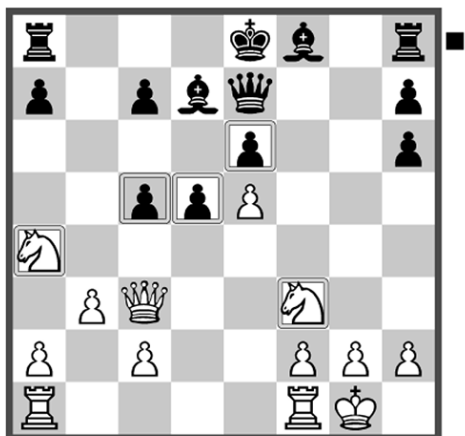


*Position after: 6...Nh6*

### **7.Bg5!**

This is a clever move. The point of it is to provoke the queen to move to d7 or the bishop to e7. With the bishop on e7, White can take on h6 and Black will have to lose time covering the weak h6-pawn, whereas if the bishop had been on f8 they would not have had to lose a tempo. Provoking ...Qd7 has a specific purpose – not to allow ...g5 at once as shown in the 7.Bf4 variation.

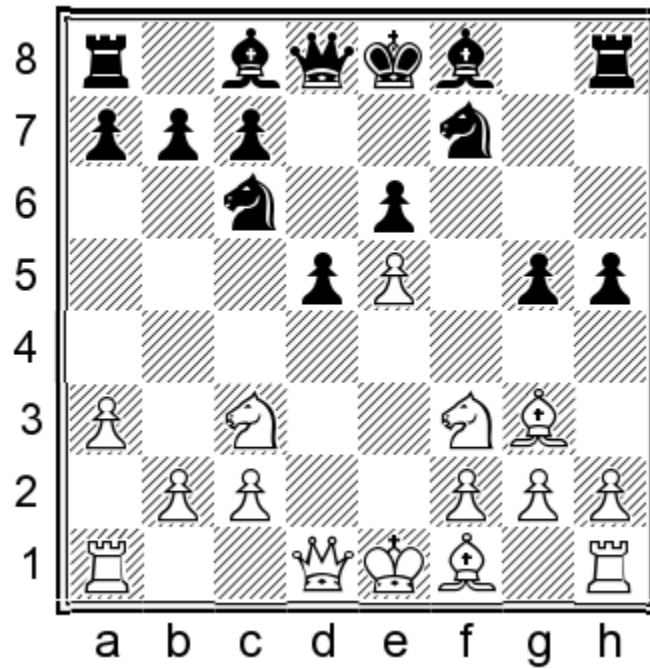
**A)** Let us examine what happens if White takes on h6 at once instead of provoking ...Be7. 7.Bxh6 gxh6 8.Bb5 Bg7 9.Bxc6+ bxc6 10.Qd4 Qe7 11.Na4 Bf8 12.0-0 c5 13.Qc3 Bd7 14.b3∞



*Position after: 14.b3*

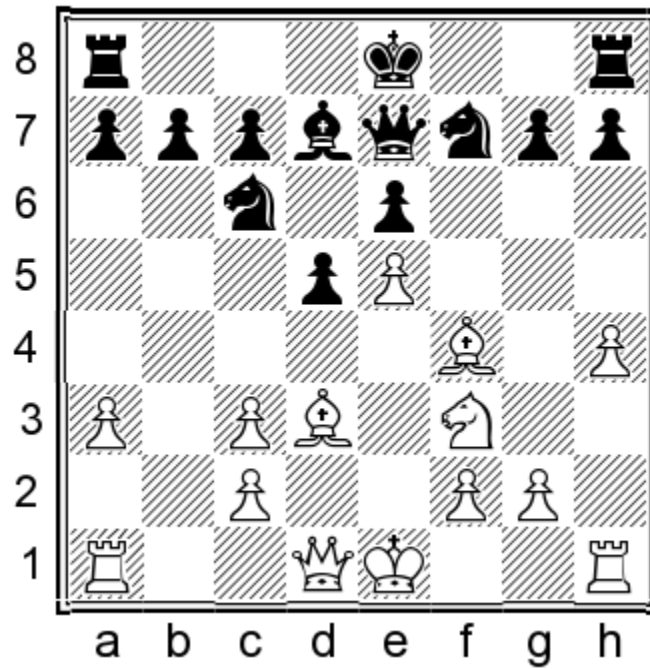
This position is far from being clear. Black has two bishops and a rather strong position in the center whereas White's knight struggles to get to good squares.

**B)** 7.Bf4 Nf7 Black would like to either start complicating the matters with ...g5 or destroy White's queenside with ...Bb4. White is unable to stop both of these positional threats at once. 8.h4 Stopping ...g5, but allowing ...Bb4. [8.a3 g5 9.Bg3 h5



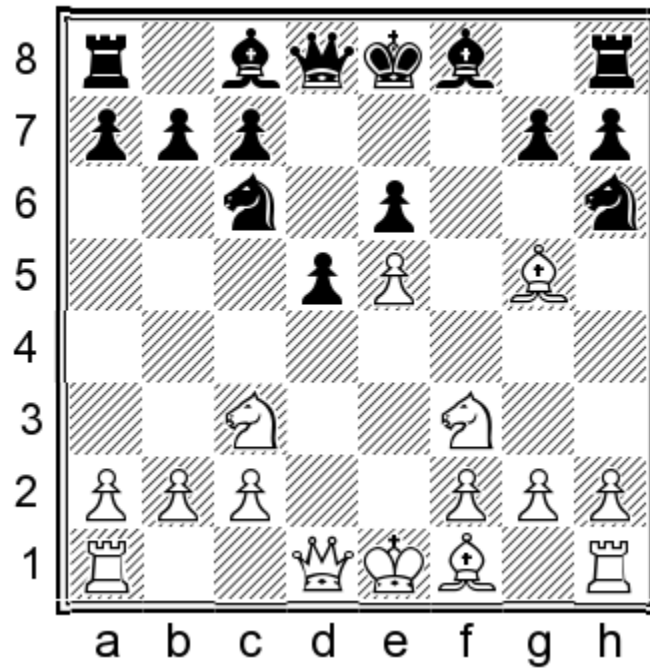
*Position after: 9...h5*

Allowing Black's kingside expansion is unpleasant here as White has to keep an eye on both ...h4 and ...g4 ideas.]  
 8...Bb4 9.a3 Bxc3+ 10.bxc3 Qe7 11.Bd3 Bd7



*Position after: 11...Bd7*

This is far from being clear as it is difficult for White to organize play on the queenside due to their damaged structure.

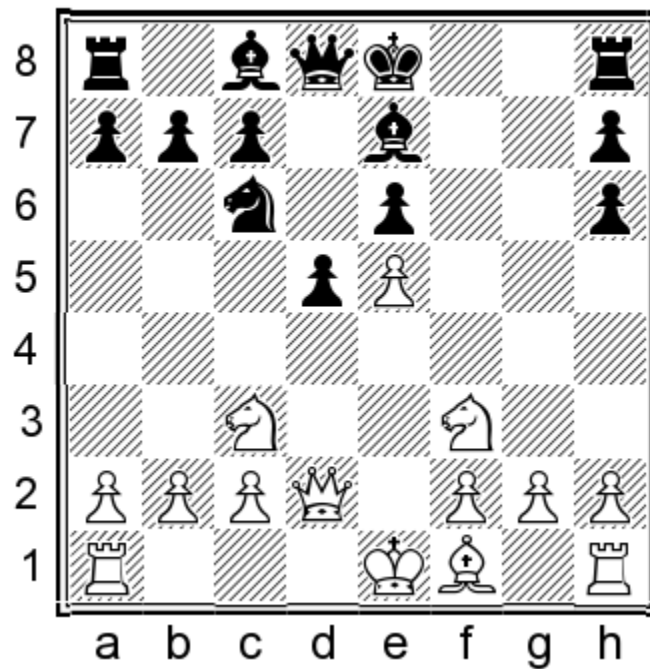


*Position after: 7.Bg5!*

**7...Qd7**

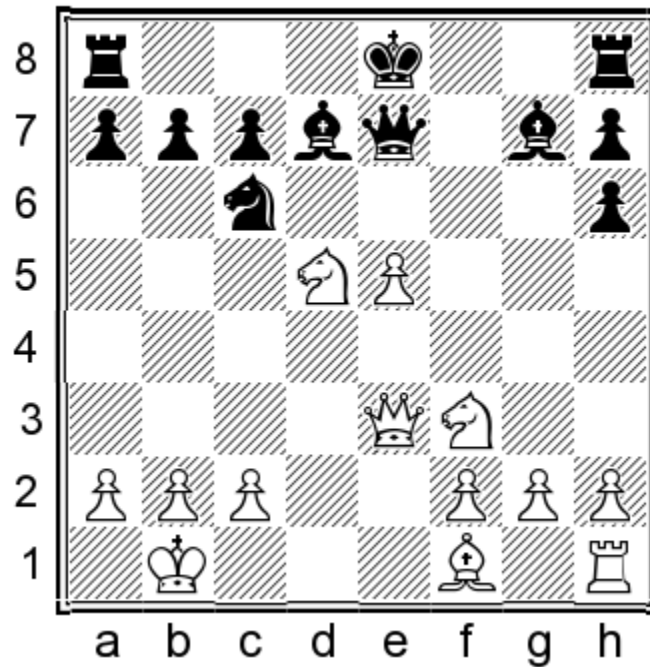
**A)** 7...Be7 Now White agrees to capture on h6 as Black's bishop has already moved from f8. 8.Bxh6 gxh6 9.Qd2





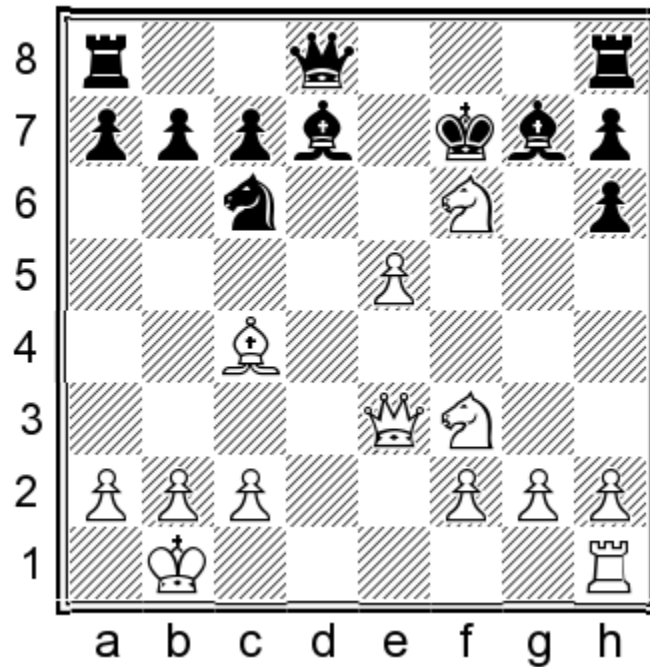
*Position after: 9.Qd2*

**A1)** 9...Bf8 10.0-0-0 Bd7 11.Qe3 Bg7 [11...Qe7 12.Nb5! is a familiar trick stopping 12...0-0-0 due to 13.Nxa7+±] 12.Kb1 White is making a useful move to see how their opponent will progress. Black would like to castle queenside but 12...Qe7 [After 12...0-0 13.Ne2 White will switch focus to the kingside, building a strong outpost for their c3-knight on f4 with g3 and h4.] runs into 13.Rxd5! exd5 14.Nxd5.



*Position after: 14.Nxd5*

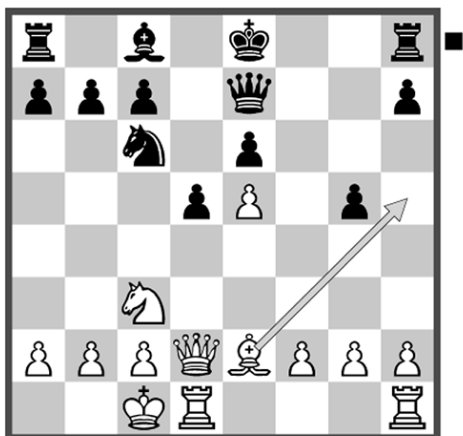
14...Qd8 [14...Qf7 15.Nxc7+ Kd8 16.Nxa8 Kc8 is more resilient but White has a lot of pawns for the piece after 17.Bb5 Kb8 18.Bxc6 Bxc6 19.Nd4 Kxa8 20.Nxc6 bxc6 21.Rd1± Technically White has three pawns for the piece, but the doubled h-pawns can be counted as one.] 15.Nf6+ Kf7 16.Bc4+



*Position after: 16.Bc4+*

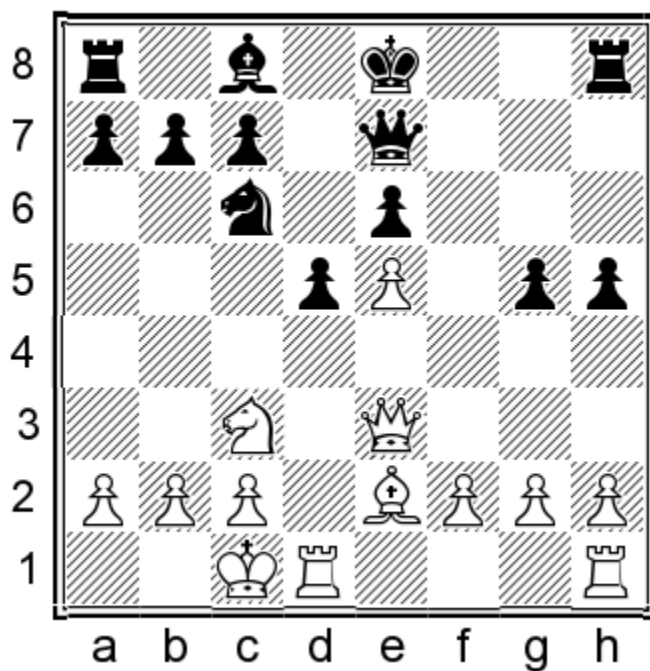
and White has a devastating attack, e.g. 16...Be6 17.Bxe6+ Kxe6 18.Qb3+ Ke7 19.Qxb7 when Black will have to part with the c6-knight at the very least. 19...Nd4 20.Qb4+ Kf7 21.Nxd4+- White's attack still continues and they are only an exchange down for as many as three (!) pawns.

**A2)** 9...Bg5 10.Nxg5 hxg5 [10...Qxg5 11.f4± strengthens e5 and leaves Black with a terrible kingside structure.] 11.0-0-0 Qe7 12.Be2



*Position after: 12.Be2*

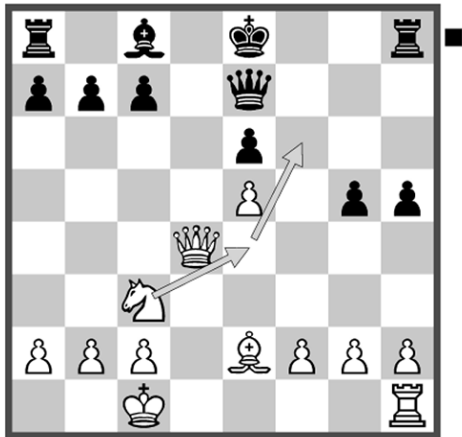
With the simple idea of Bh5+ in mind. 12...h5 [Black really should not take the bait with 12...Nxe5 13.Bh5+ Ng6 because White has the strong 14.Nxd5! exd5 15.Rhe1 Be6 16.Rxe6! Qxe6 17.Re1 Kd7 18.Rxe6 Kxe6 19.Qxg5+- when Black's king in the center should not survive against the Q+B tandem.] 13.Qe3



*Position after: 13.Qe3*

Finally covering the e5-pawn. Black has seriously weakened their position and they cannot develop the rest of their queenside easily.

**A2.1)** 13...d4? is pretty naive. White happily sacrifices an exchange as 14.Rxd4 Nxd4 15.Qxd4

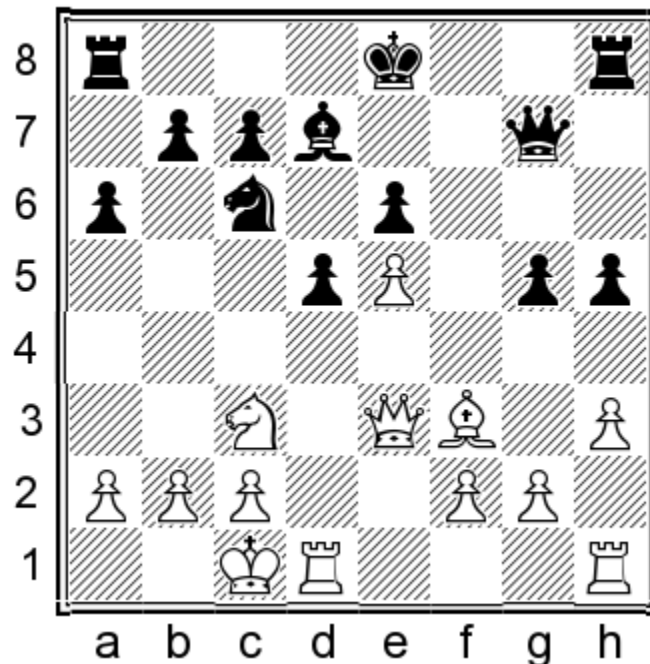


*Position after: 15.Qxd4*

leaves Black helpless against the Ne4-f6 maneuver. 15...Bd7 [15...0-0 16.Ne4 looks really terrible for Black. Black's kingside pawns will start falling soon and they still cannot get the a8-rook and c8-bishop into play as if 16...Bd7 17.Nf6+-] 16.Ne4, with a terrific compensation for the exchange. White will have a pawn and a strong knight on f6 for the rook and Black's king has to stay in the center because 16...0-0-0? is inadvisable due to 17.Qxa7+-.

**A2.2)** 13...Bd7 14.Nb5!± shows another upside of the Qe3 maneuver – Black cannot castle due to the hanging a7-pawn.

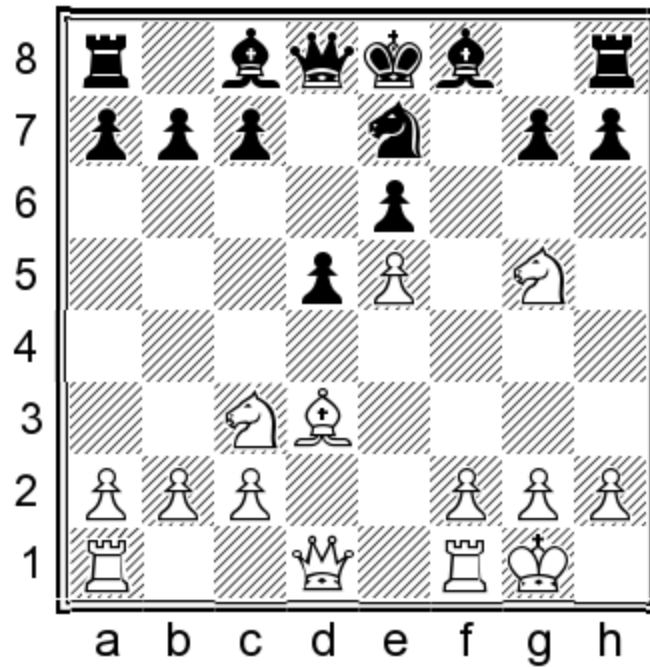
**A2.3)** 13...a6 14.Bf3! Black has stopped Nb5 but White always has some sophisticated way of stopping ...Bd7 anyway. 14...Qg7 [14...Bd7? 15.Bxd5! should already be quite a familiar strike. 15...exd5 16.Nxd5 Qd8 17.Nf6+ Ke7 18.Nxd7+–] 15.h3, to cover the threat of ...g4. Now 15...Bd7



*Position after: 15...Bd7*

is still unavailable: 16.Nxd5 exd5 17.e6 Bc8 18.Rxd5 because Black loses all their pawns, e.g. 18...0-0 19.Rxg5+–.

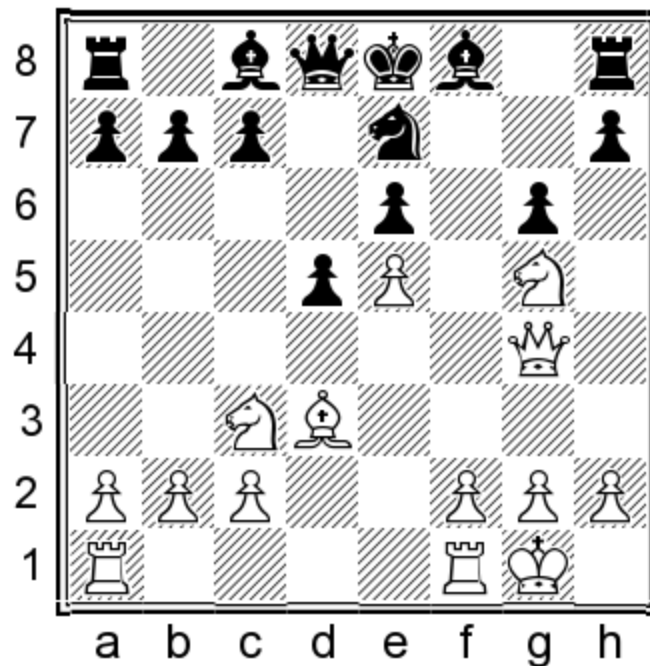
**B)** 7...Ne7 is a rather awkward move to play. We continue 8.Bd3 Nf7 and we can even leave the bishop on g5 to be exchanged. 9.0-0 Nxg5 After 10.Nxg5



*Position after: 10.Nxg5*

Black will be giving themselves nothing but trouble. On the other hand if they do not take on g5 then it is impossible for them to untangle their pieces.

**B1)** 10...g6 is not much help due to 11.Qg4

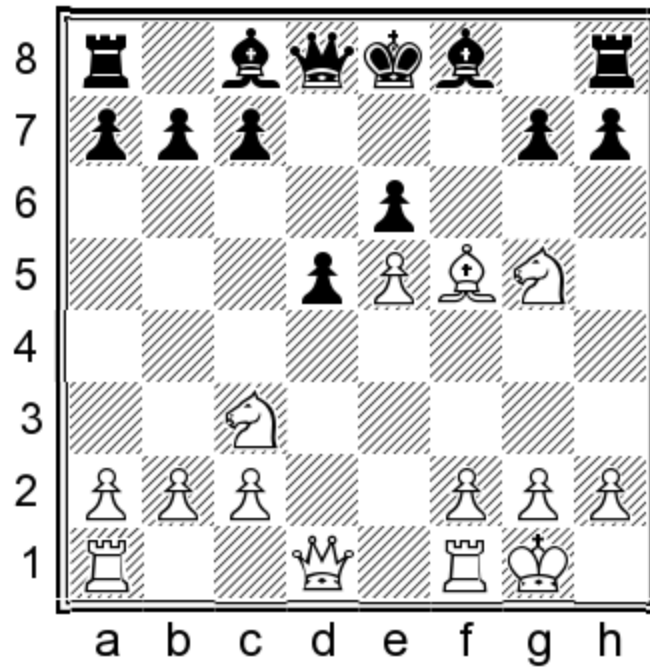


*Position after: 11.Qg4*

11...Nf5 [11...c6 12.Ne2, planning Nf4, hitting e6, is great for White; 11...h5 12.Qg3 Nf5 13.Bxf5! gxf5 14.h4 is also very nice. White's knights have great squares on g5 and f4 and the h5-pawn will always be very weak.] 12.Nxh7! and Black is crushed after 12...Rxh7 13.Qxg6+ Rf7 14.Bxf5 exf5 15.e6+- when Black has to return the piece and may end up getting mated anyway.

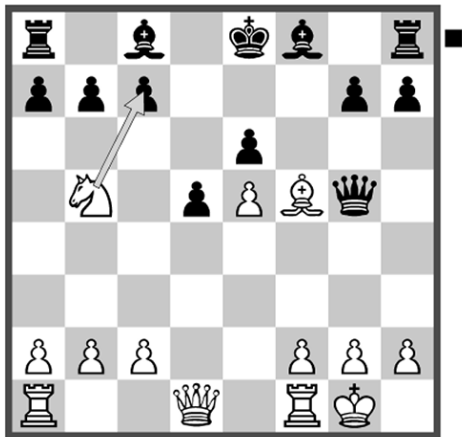
**B2)** 10...Nf5 11.Bxf5





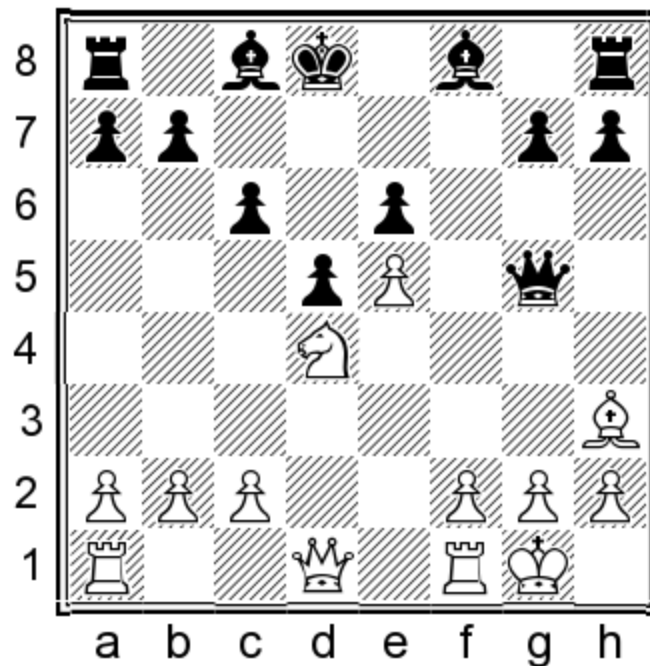
*Position after: 11.Bxf5*

11...Qxg5 [11...exf5 12.Nxd5! is bad as the g5-knight is taboo because of the fork on c7, and 12...c6 runs into 13.Nf6+! gxf6 14.Qh5+ Kd7 15.Rfd1++-.] 12.Nb5!



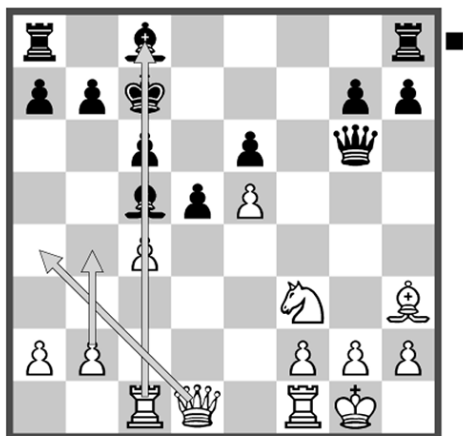
*Position after: 12.Nb5!*

12...Kd8 A sad necessity. [12...Qd8 13.Qh5+ g6 14.Bxg6+! wins material 14...hxg6 15.Qxh8+-; 12...Qe7 has similar issues 13.Qh5+ g6 14.Bxg6++-.] 13.Bh3 With the king on d8 White is happy to retreat part of their army and prepare the next wave of attack. 13...c6 14.Nd4



*Position after: 14.Nd4*

14...Bc5 [14...Qxe5 would be too optimistic. White opens the position like a tin can with 15.Re1+-, removing the e6-lid.] 15.Nf3 Qg6 16.c4! Of course you should open the position when the opponent's king is in the center. 16...Kc7 17.Rc1<sup>2</sup>



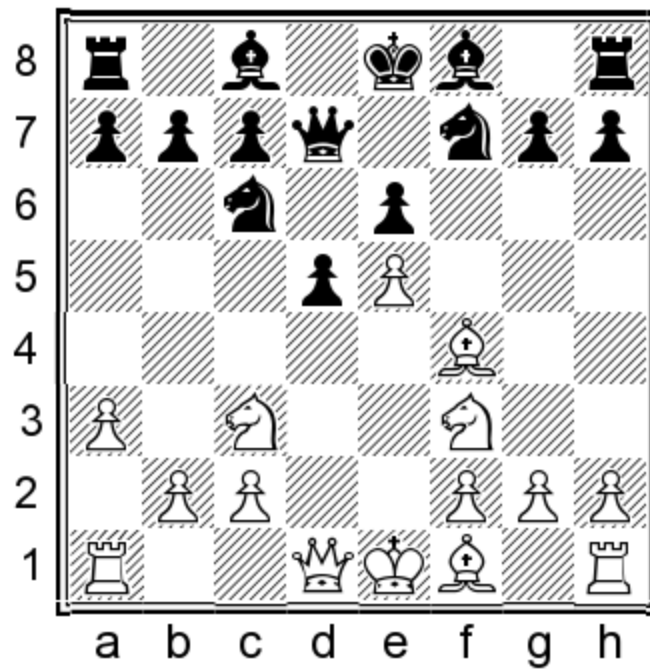
*Position after: 17.Rc1<sup>2</sup>*

White has a nice and simple to play position. They can continue the attack with Qa4 and b4, storming Black's queenside.

**8.a3**

Stopping ...Bb4 and potentially preparing b2-b4.

**8...Nf7 9.Bf4**

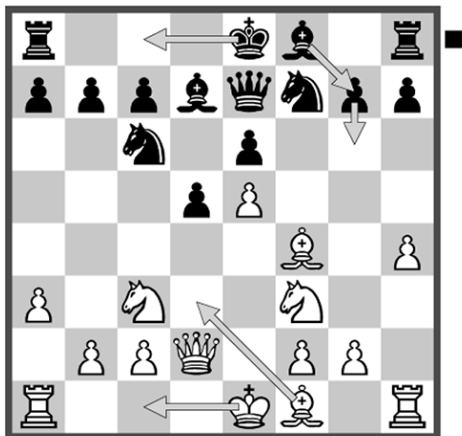


*Position after: 9.Bf4*

Had the black queen still been on d8 then Black could play ...g5 in this position, and hence we see the main reason for including 7.Bg5.

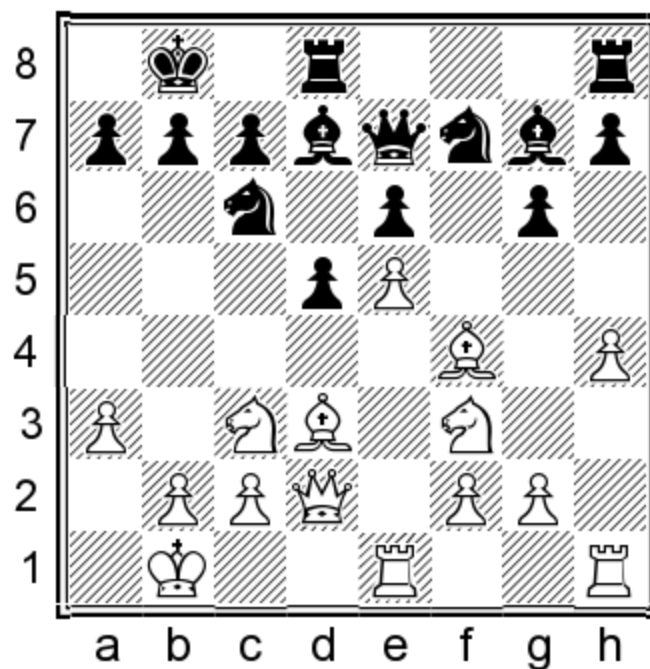
### 9...b6

9...Qe7 Black does not even try to make use of the extra tempo they were given. 10.h4 Bd7 11.Qd2



*Position after: 11.Qd2*

The move orders don't matter here all that much, and Black will eventually play ...Bd7, ...0-0-0, ...g6, and ...Bg7 in some order. I propose the following set-up for White; 11...0-0-0 12.Bd3 g6 13.0-0-0 Bg7 so far everything has been logical, and now we must first cover the e5-pawn with a rook of course. I prefer to keep the king's rook on the h-file for the moment as it can support h4-h5 in some cases. 14.Rde1 Kb8 15.Kb1

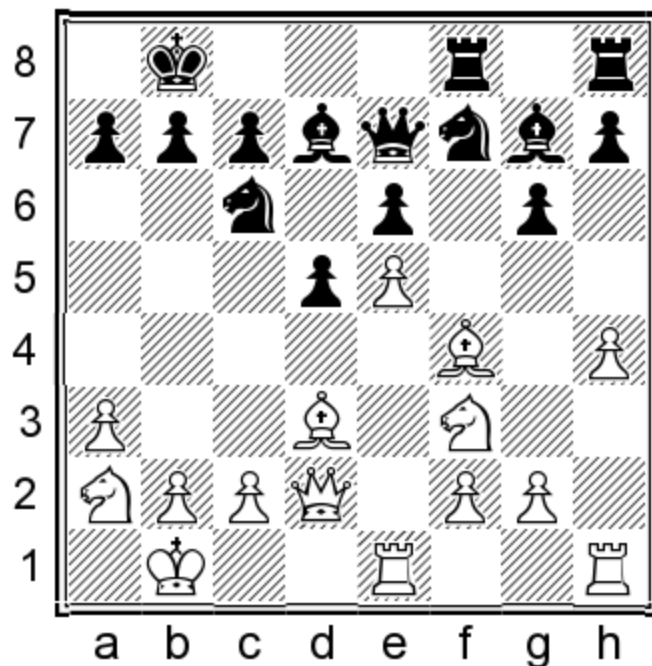


*Position after: 15.Kb1*

The king moves are beneficial for both parties, as Black has the c8-square for their pieces in some variations and White might play c4 in the future so it seems logical to move the king further away.

**A)** 15...Rdf8 The rook is not so great on f8. White plans to ultimately prepare opening the queenside with c4 and the

rook on f8 will be missing out on some of the fun happening on the other side of the board. 16.Na2! Preparing the aforementioned c2-c4 move.

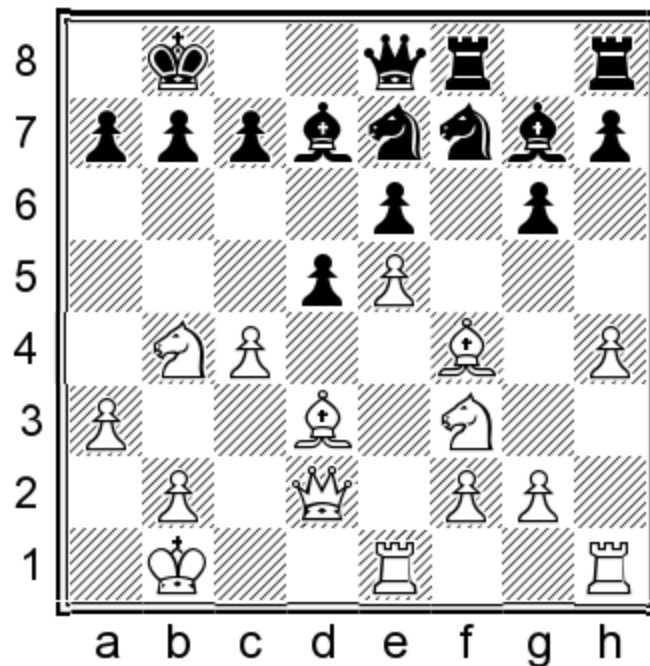


*Position after: 16.Na2!*

16...Qe8 17.Nb4 It is a good idea to move the knight to b4 because Black cannot really risk strengthening White's grip on the queenside by taking it.

**A1)** 17...Nxb4 18.axb4<sup>2</sup> feels very nice for White. As there is no ...c5, they can think of relocating the remaining knight to d4, toy with h4-h5 ideas, and even think about attacking on the queenside as the a7-square might prove to be weak.

**A2)** 17...Ne7 18.c4!

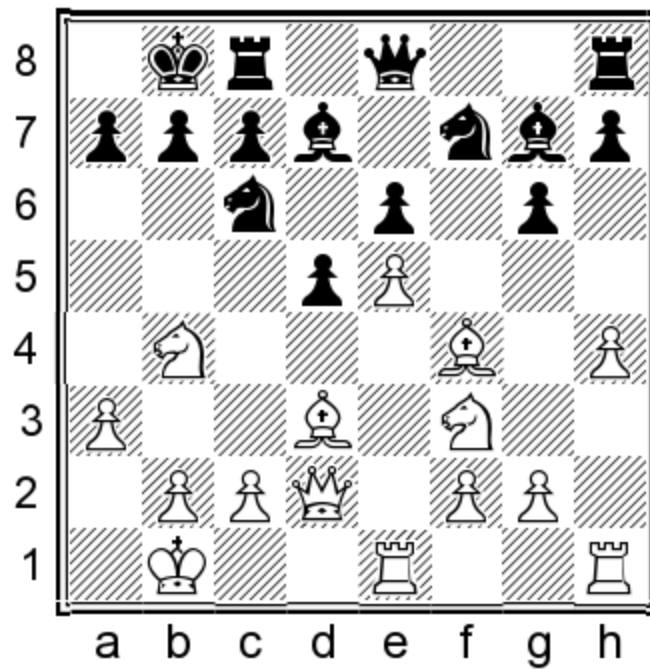


*Position after: 18.c4!*

White is continuing to play on the queenside quite naturally. 18...Nd8 [18...dxc4 19.Bxc4 c5 20.Nd3 Qc8 21.Rc1! shows why it would be so nice to have a rook on c8 instead. The black queen does not feel very comfortable opposing the c1-rook.] 19.Bg3<sup>2</sup> Securing the bishop. White has a fine grip on the queenside and more space. Black's pieces feel very weird on the last two ranks.

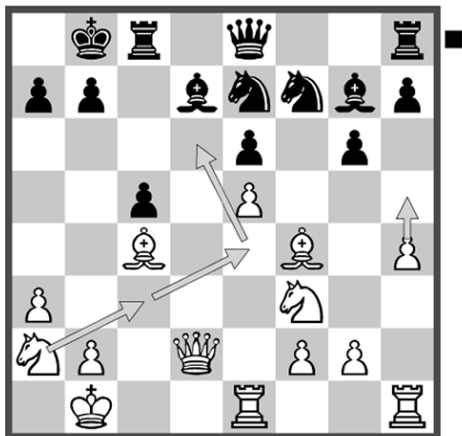
**B)** 15...Qe8 16.h5 g5 17.Nxg5 Nxg5 18.Bxg5± is the reason for Black's mysterious rook moves.

**C)** 15...Rc8 Black should remove the rook from d8 as h4-h5 was a threat and the rook would have been under fire from White's dark-squared bishop, as in line B). 16.Na2 Qe8 The plans are a bit slow here but eventually White should be able to reorganize their forces, play c2-c4, and claim a spatial advantage. 17.Nb4



*Position after: 17.Nb4*

It is a bit too early for c4 just yet. We first push the opponent's knight back. 17...Ne7 [17...Nxb4 18.axb4 is not a great idea even with a rook on c8. White has simply too much control on the queenside now and Black has lost the option of getting a strong center with ...c5.] 18.c4! Now is the right time. 18...dxc4 19.Bxc4 c5 20.Na2<sup>2</sup>





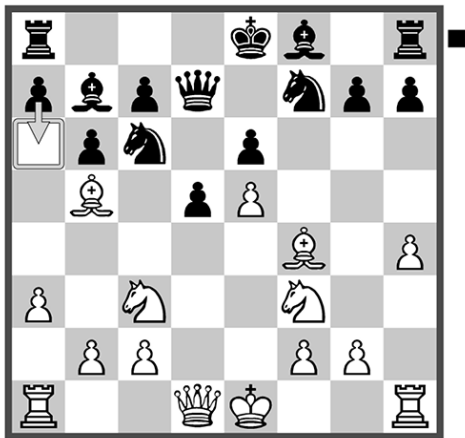
*Position after: 20.Na2<sup>2</sup>*

It is true that Black managed to get at least some space with ...c5, but it has come at the price of weakening the d6-square, which might be exploited after a subsequent Nc3-e4-d6. At the same time their pieces are still rather passive and they have to constantly watch out for h4-h5 ideas.

### **10.h4**

A useful move gaining some space on the kingside, dissuading ...g5 ideas.

### **10...Bb7 11.Bb5**

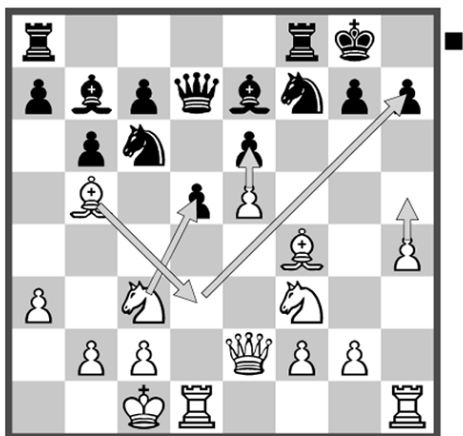


*Position after: 11.Bb5*

White wants to provoke the weakening move ...a6, which is especially important after Black castles queenside.

### **11...a6**

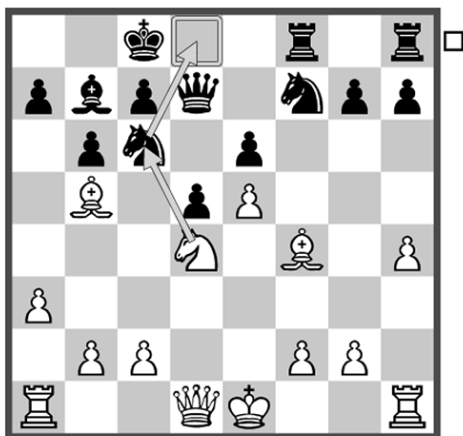
**A)** Going for kingside castling is a seppuku. After 11...Be7 12.Qe2 0-0 13.0-0-0



*Position after: 13.0-0-0*

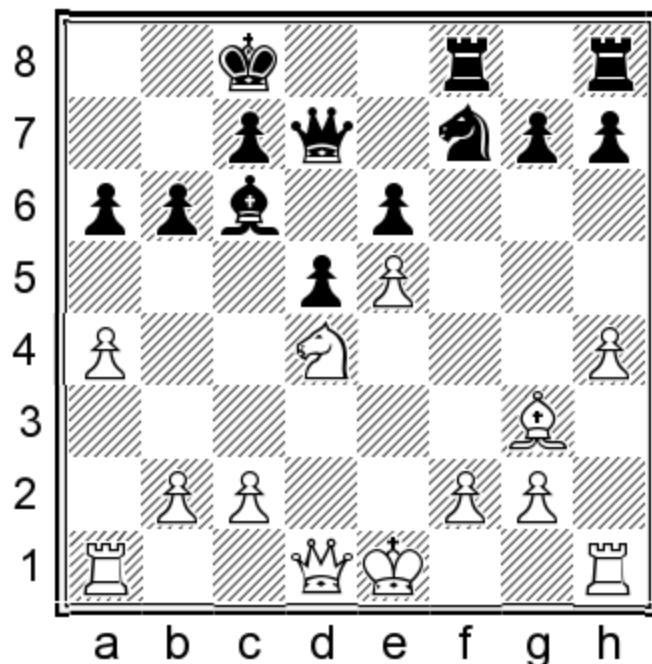
I doubt Black will survive for long. White is immediately threatening to take on d5 and push e5-e6, and even the primitive plan of attacking the kingside with Bd3 and h4-h5 is also very unpleasant.

**B)** After 11...0-0-0 the struggle for and against ... a6 begins. 12.Nd4! Bc5 [12...a6? loses a pawn now due to 13.Nxc6 Bxc6 14.Bxa6+±.] 13.Nce2 Securing the knight. 13...Bxd4 14.Nxd4 Rdf8



*Position after: 14...Rdf8*

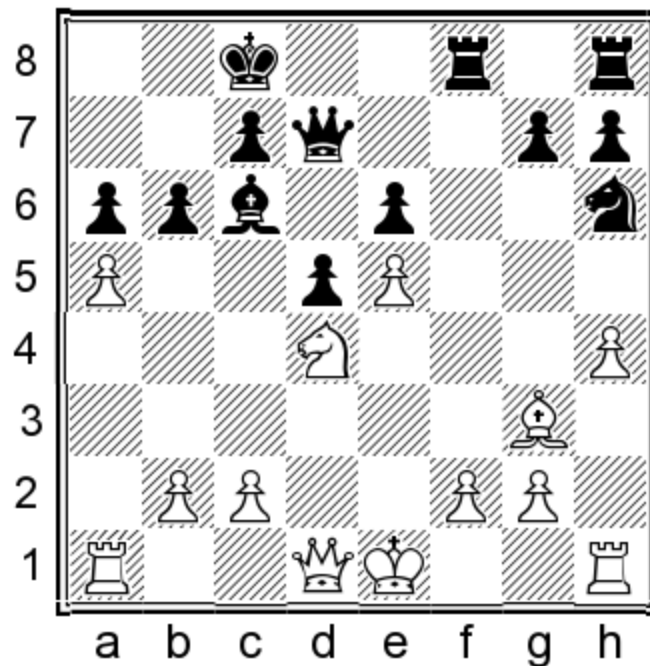
Now Black is ready to play ...a6 as there is no rook hanging on d8 after Nxc6. Therefore White first secures their piece potentially hanging on f4 and prepares another disruptive operation on the queenside. 15.Bg3 a6 16.Bxc6 [16.Nxc6 axb5 would be nothing special for White now.] 16...Bxc6 17.a4



*Position after: 17.a4*

**B1)** 17...Bxa4 does not win a pawn due to the counterstrike 18.Nxe6!, and after 18...Qxe6 19.Rxa4 Nxe5 20.Qe2! the complications are clearly in White's favor. Black's king has to go on a run after 20...Re8 21.Qxa6+ Kd7 22.0-0± when White stands clearly superior.

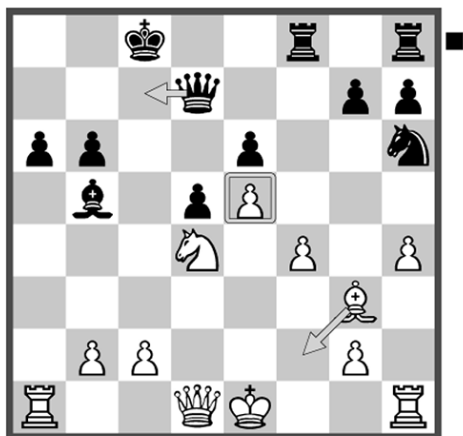
**B2)** 17...a5 is not desirable for Black because of 18.b4! axb4 19.a5!± when Black's king defenses are falling apart, e.g. 19...Kb7 20.axb6 cxb6 21.Rb1 Qe7 22.c3! and Black cannot hold everything together. 22...bxc3 23.Qb3 Qc5 24.Nxe6+- **B3)** 17...Nh6 18.a5



*Position after: 18.a5*

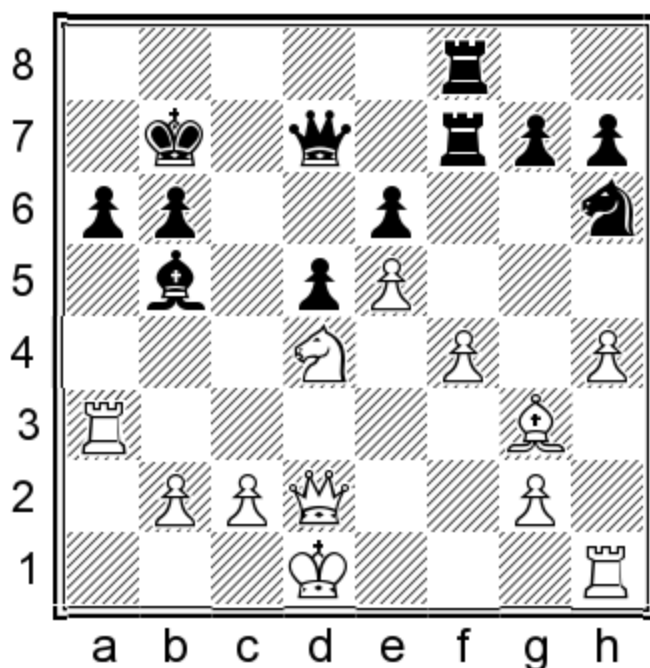
**B3.1)** 18...b5? would be a positional blunder and after 19.f3, intending Bf2 and Nb3-c5 White would have an overwhelming position thanks to the weak dark squares in Black's camp. Even with opposite-coloured bishops after 19...Nf5 20.Bf2 Nxd4 21.Qxd4 White will have all the fun because Black's bishop is about as useful as a pawn on c6 would be.

**B3.2)** 18...Bb5 19.axb6 cxb6 20.f4



*Position after: 20.f4*

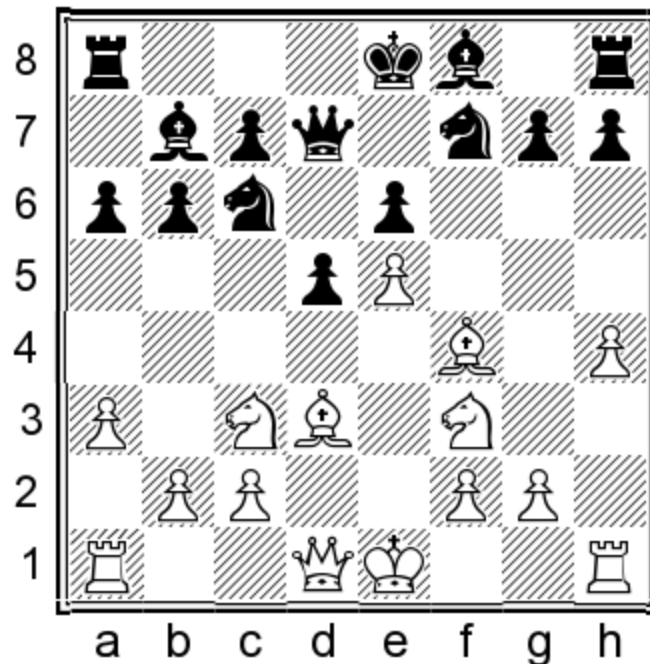
Here we should secure the e5-pawn a bit because it might be vulnerable after a subsequent Bf2, ...Qc7. 20...Kb7 21.Ra3 Rf7 [21...Nf5 22.Bf2 Nxd4 23.Qxd4 is once again not great because Black has a big weakness on b6 and thanks to the spatial advantage White will be able to quickly harass their opponent on the other side of the board (with Rg3) as well.] 22.Qd2 Rhf8 23.Kd1!²



*Position after: 23.Kd1!*<sup>2</sup>

White is waiting for the ...Nf5-hit so that they can play Bf2 and target the b6-weakness, and at the same time makes a useful move. The king will find a safe haven on the queenside (either b1 or c1). White can slowly prepare the move Bf2 with Rf3 in the future too. However it is not so simple to find such an easy plan for Black.

## 12.Bd3

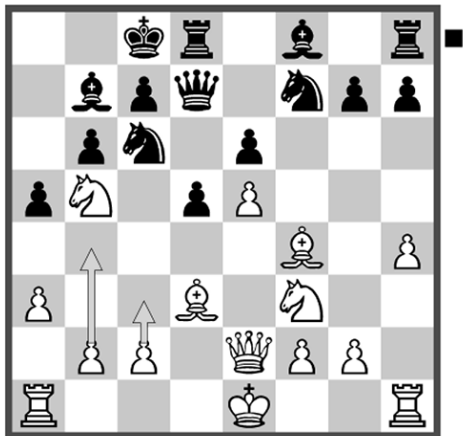


*Position after: 12.Bd3*

## 12...Na5

Black refrains from queenside castling and prepares ...c5, but after such a move it will be even harder to find a safe square for their king.

12...0-0-0 13.Qe2 a5 White has managed to provoke a useful hook on the queenside which will help them organize a strong attack with 14.Nb5!



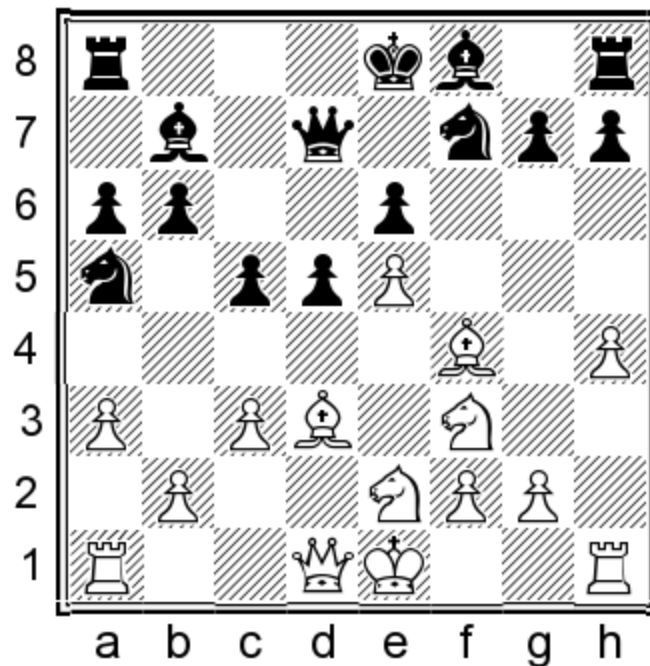
*Position after: 14.Nb5!*

intending c3 and b4. 14...Be7 15.c3 Kb8 16.b4 White will continue with Nbd4, getting rid of the a5-square defender and threatening to capture on c6 and a5.

### **13.Ne2**

A bit of prophylaxis is always good – we should strive to take the central squares under greater control.

**13...c5 14.c3<sup>2</sup>**



*Position after: 14.c3<sup>2</sup>*

Since we have effectively stopped Black's pawn advances in the center, the idea now is to castle kingside and keep an eye on Black's king. If it castles queenside then we push b2-b4 and utilize the weakening ...c5-move. Castling kingside is always very risky as many White's pieces are directed against it and especially the b1-h7 diagonal might be weak after Qc2 or Qb1. If Black's king stays in the center we might try to push b2-b4 anyway, opening up the position.



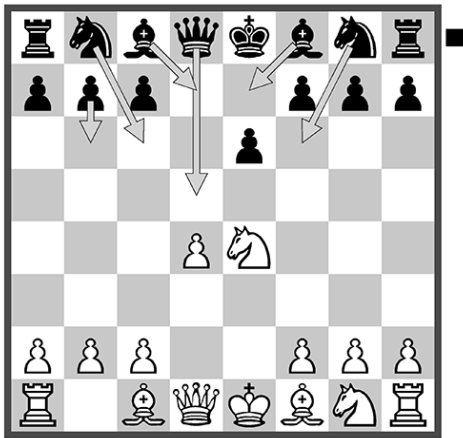
# **Part III**

## **Rubinstein Variation**

# Chapter 4

## Rubinstein Sidelines

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4**



### Chapter Guide

#### Chapter 4 - Rubinstein Sidelines

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4

a) 4...b6?!

b) 4...Nf6?!

c) 4...Be7

d) 4...Nc6

e) 4...Qd5

f) 4...Bd7 & 6...Nf6

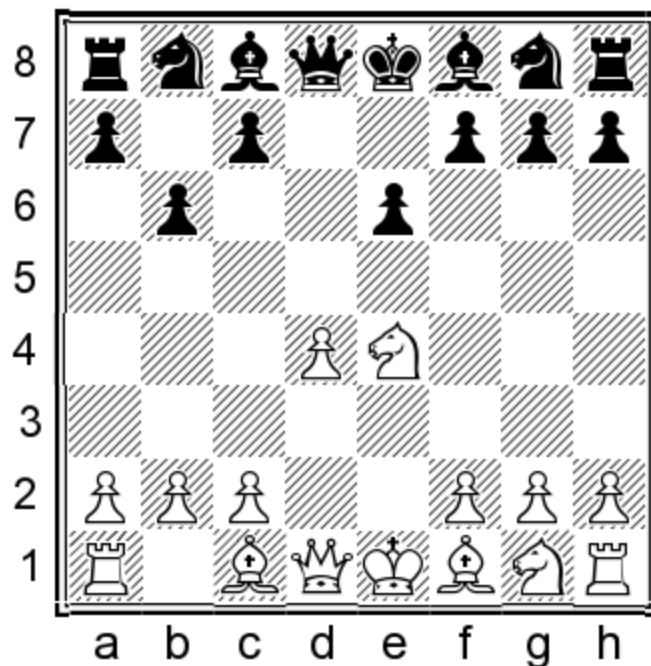
g) 4...Bd7 & 6...Nd7

### a) 4...b6?!

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4**

The Rubinstein Variation. Many French defense players employ it as this move can be played against both Nd2 and Nc3. In this chapter we will deal with all of its subsystems on move 4 before moving on to the main positions arising after 4...Nd7.

**4.Nxe4 b6?!**



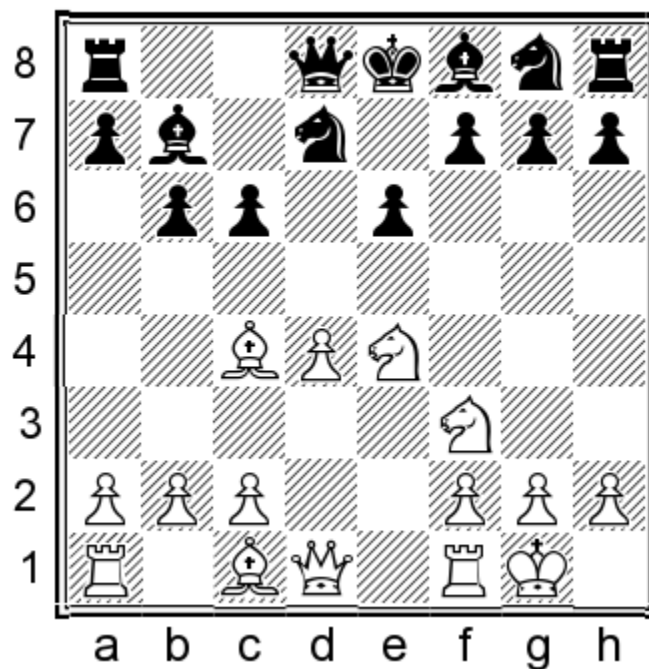
*Position after: 4...b6?!*

The idea of putting the bishop on the a8-h1 diagonal seems reasonable but it does not quite work here. Therefore Black should either postpone the development of the c8-bishop or opt for the ...Bd7-c6 maneuver.

### 5.Nf3 Bb7 6.Bb5+!

Forcing Black to play ...c6 thereby limiting Black's b7-bishop scope. ...c6 is not really any kind of gain for Black and in fact it basically forces them to play ...c5 at some point as there is no other way to resurrect their bishop.

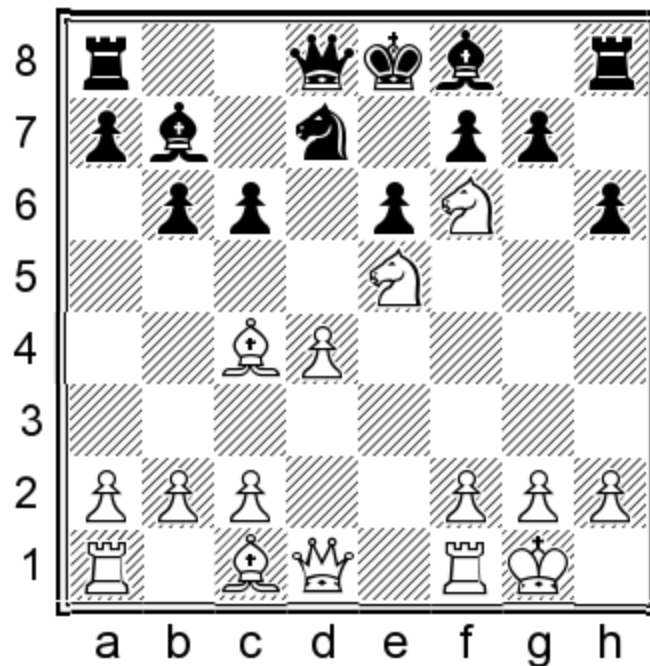
### 6...c6 7.Bc4 Nd7 8.0-0



*Position after: 8.0-0*

### 8...Ngf6

8...h6 illustrates rather well the fact that the opening is not just about pushing one's pawns forward. 9.Ne5 Ngf6 [9...Nxe5 10.dxe5 Qxd1 11.Rxd1 brings Black no relief even in the endgame. They cannot bring their kingside pieces out as 11...Ne7 runs into 12.Nd6++-.] 10.Nxf6+



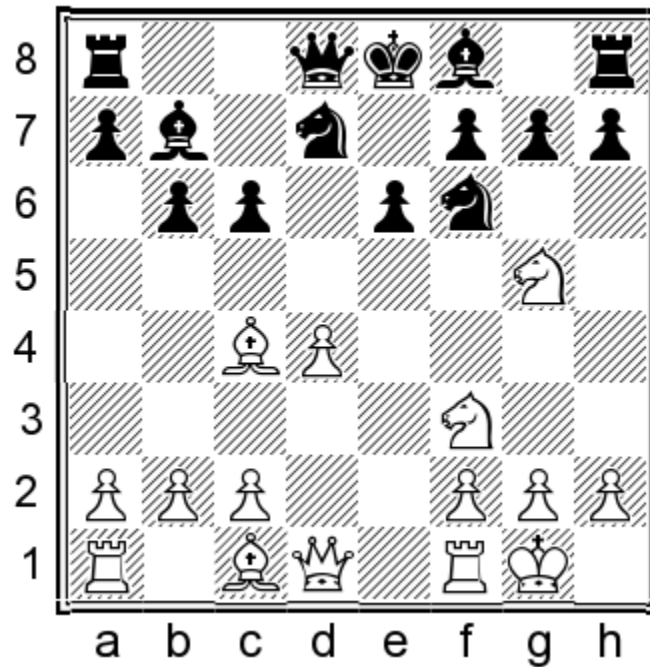
*Position after: 10.Nxf6+*

**A)** 10...Nxf6 11.Bxe6! fxe6 12.Qd3+- is crushing as Qg6+ is an unstoppable threat.

**B)** 10...gxf6 11.Nxf7! and it's already over for Black as well. 11...Kxf7 12.Qh5+ Ke7 13.Re1 The following line is a little sadistic, but it is always better to be as precise as possible. 13...e5 14.dxe5 fxe5 15.Rxe5+! Nxe5 16.Qxe5+ Kd7 17.Bf4+- and Black cannot survive after the subsequent Rd1.

**C)** 10...Qxf6 A sad necessity. All the other moves are losing straightaway. 11.f4± White has more space and is ahead in development, while Black's king is still in the center and it will take quite some time to evacuate it.

## 9.Neg5

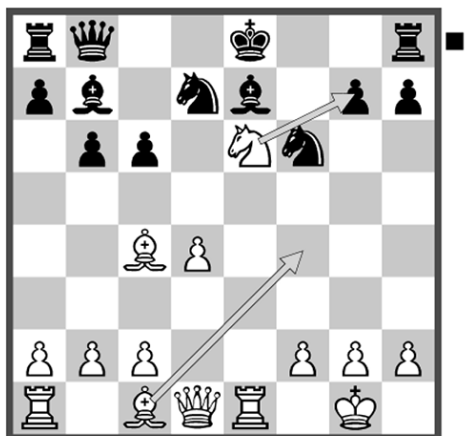


*Position after: 9.Neg5*

## 9...h6

White is already much better here and the last move prepares a decisive knight strike. I gave this little bit naive move for Black just to illustrate the strength of White's attack.

Actually White does not even require any encouragement as 9...Be7 also loses due to a knight sacrifice 10.Nxf7! Kxf7 11.Ng5+ Ke8 12.Nxe6 Qb8 and White brings another piece into the attack with 13.Re1! Black is completely helpless against the terrifying threats of Nxg7+ or Bf4.

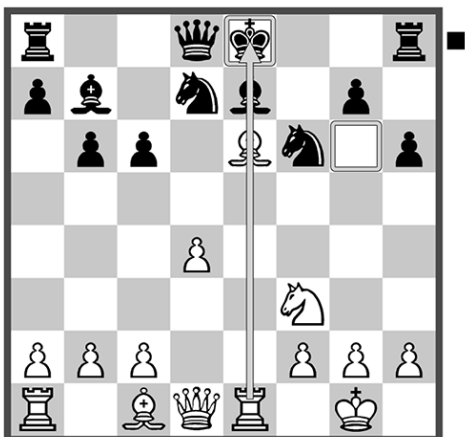


*Position after: 13.Re1!*

**10.Nxe6!**

To be frank it would be very embarrassing for the knight to retreat so there was only one logical move left.

**10...fxe6 11.Re1 Be7 12.Bxe6**

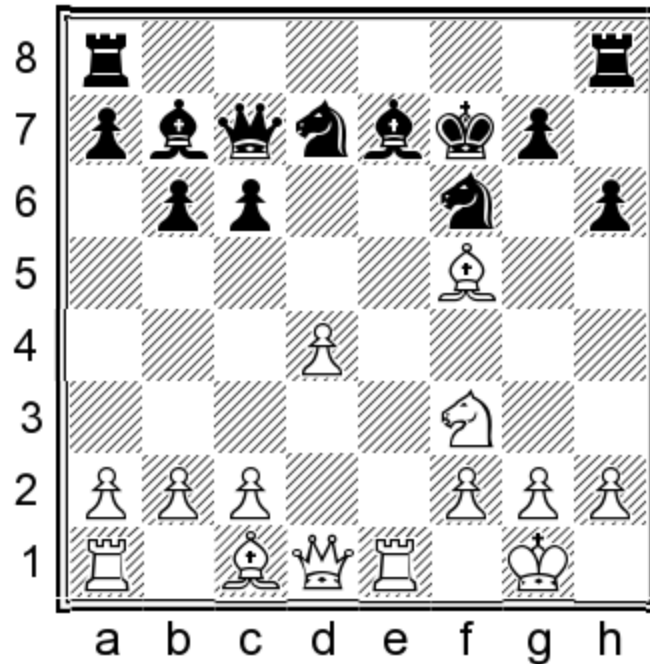


*Position after: 12.Bxe6*

White has great compensation for the piece as the light squares in Black's camp are terribly weak and the black king is stuck in the center.

## 12...Nf8

12...Qc7 13.Bf5! stops Black from castling queenside, and after 13...Kf7



*Position after: 13...Kf7*

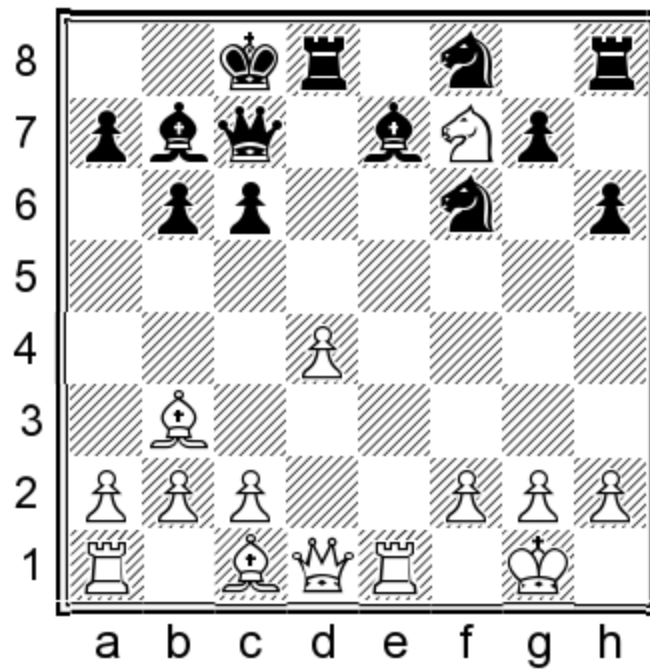
White has the beautiful move 14.Bg6+!, engineering their rook to the 7th rank. 14...Kxg6 15.Rxe7 Kh7 16.Qd3+ Kg8 17.Qg6 Rh7 18.Qf7+ Kh8 19.Nh4+- and White delivers an unusual kind of smothered mate on g6.

## 13.Bb3

White saves the very active bishop from being exchanged and they will start to exploit the weakened light squares with Ne5 next.

**13...Qc7 14.Ne5 0-0-0 15.Nf7**



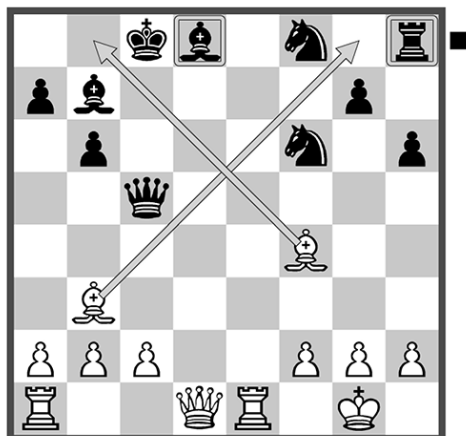


*Position after: 15.Nf7*

**15...c5**

15...Rh7 16.Nxd8 Qxd8 17.Bf4± is rather similar. White has very nice compensation.

**16.Nxd8 Bxd8 17.dxc5 Qxc5 18.Bf4±**

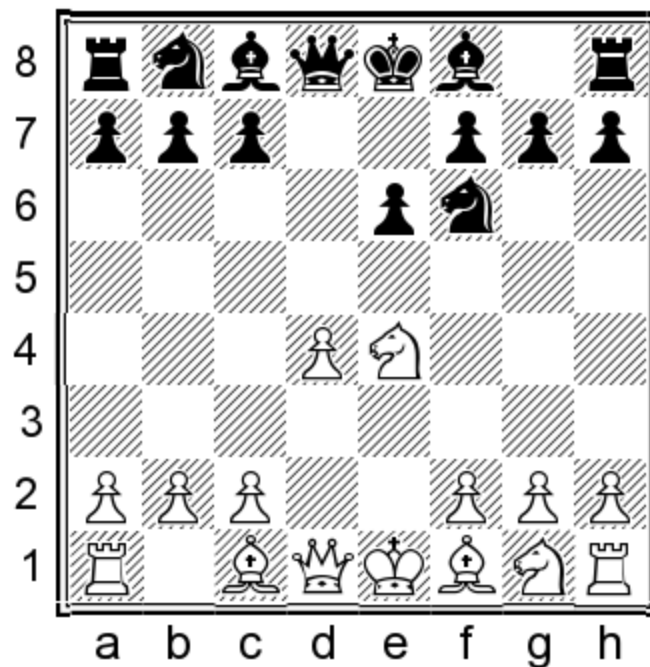


*Position after: 18.Bf4±*

White is clearly better here. Two pieces can sometimes outdo a rook and two pawns, but this is not the case here. White's pieces are tremendously active whereas Black's pieces are a poor sight, and the black king is weak.

**b) 4...Nf6?!**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nf6?!**

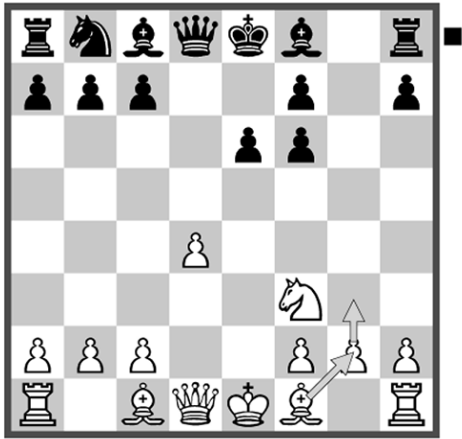


*Position after: 4...Nf6?!*

I don't like this move. Black either recaptures with the queen and loses a lot of time, or permanently damages their kingside pawn structure. In any case the price is too high.

**5.Nxf6+ Qxf6**

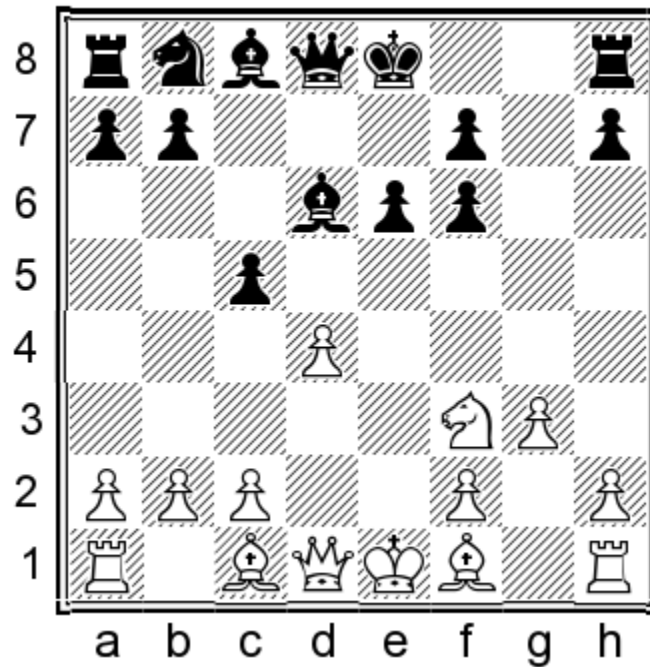
5...gxf6 6.Nf3



*Position after: 6.Nf3*

These structures are usually pretty comfortable for White. The ideal set-up for White is to play g3 and Bg2, which will not only neutralize any counterplay on the g-file, but the light-squared bishop will be very strong on the long diagonal as well. If Black just sits and does nothing, eventually they will be smashed on the queenside after c4, possibly with a3 and b4, or simply d5, therefore they try to play either ...e5 or ...c5.

**A)** 6...Bd6 7.g3 c5

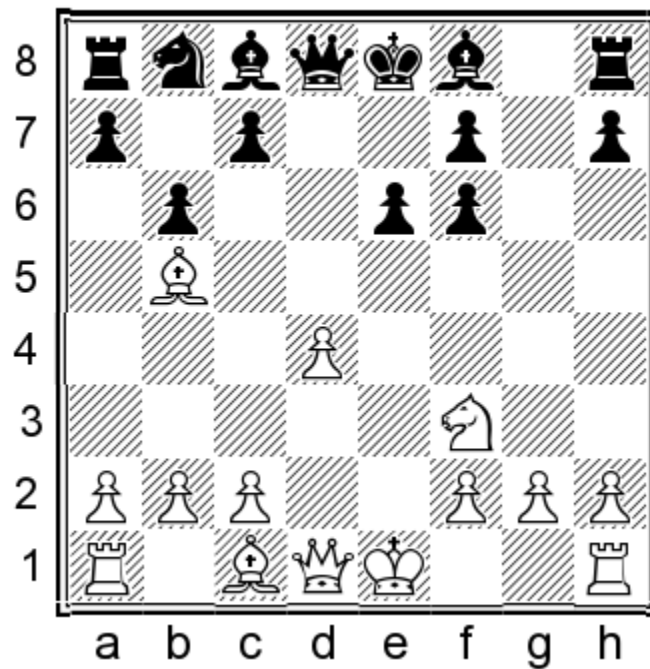


*Position after: 7...c5*

This approach is also not great. Black will eventually have to capture on d4 as White will put more pressure on Black's center with Bg2 and Be3, threatening d5 in some cases. 8.Bg2 cxd4 9.Nxd4 and White has a great position. They will continue with simple development in the form of 0-0 and Be3. The damaged kingside structure is a constant source of headache for the defender.

**B)** 6...Rg8 7.g3 c5 8.Bg2 The rook move looks rather pointless with a pawn on g3.

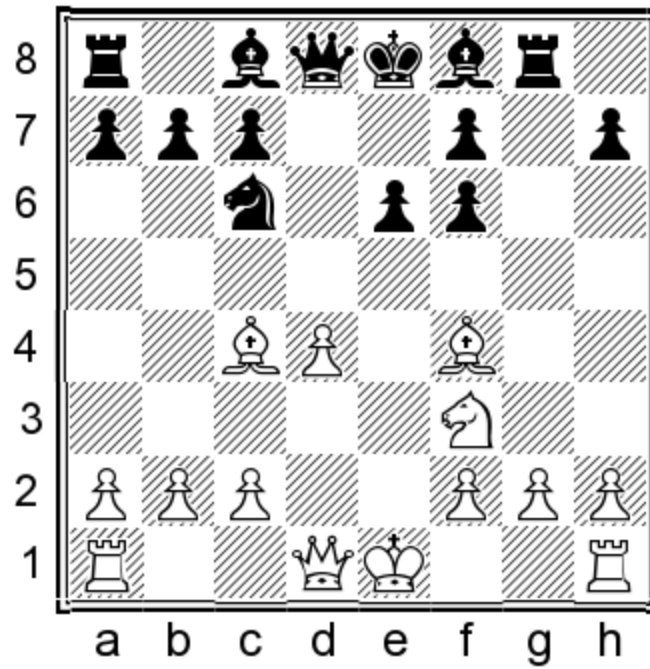
**C)** 6...b6 7.Bb5+!



*Position after: 7.Bb5+!*

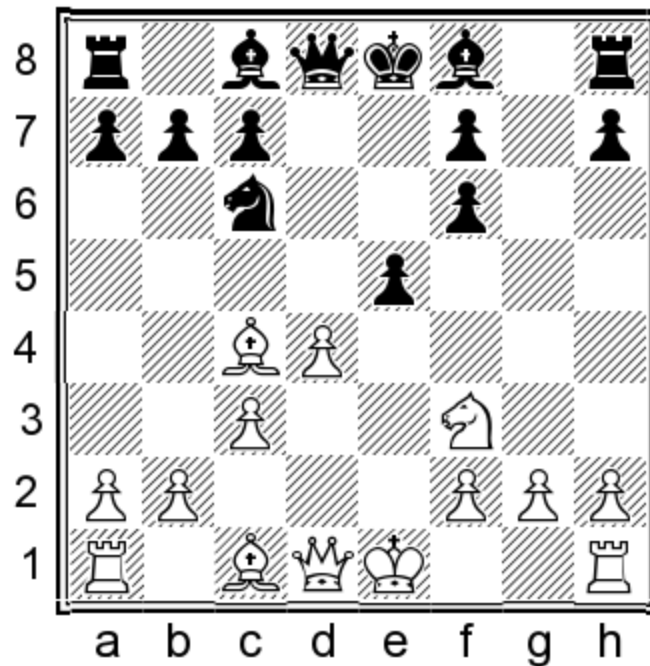
is the same motif we saw in the 4... b6 variation. It is useful to force ...c6 as it will obstruct Black's light-squared bishop. 7...c6 8.Bc4 Ba6 9.Bxa6 Nxa6 10.0-0± Due to the lousily placed Na6, White does not even mind exchanging the bishops. They will continue with 0-0, Qe2, and c4, preparing the d5-break and an attack in the center and/or on the queenside.

**D) 6...Nc6** This forces White to alter their set-up a little bit as the c6-knight supports ...e5 which would work well against our favorite g3. 7.Bc4 e5 [After 7...Rg8 White will utilize the same idea as in the main line 8.Bf4!



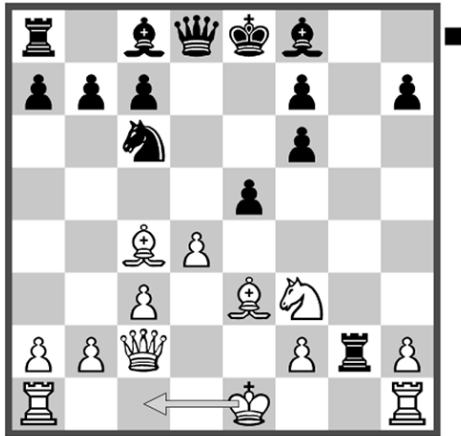
*Position after: 8.Bf4!*

with the point that after 8...Rxc2 9.Bg3 and the rook will be collected by either Kf1 or Bf1.] 8.c3



*Position after: 8.c3*

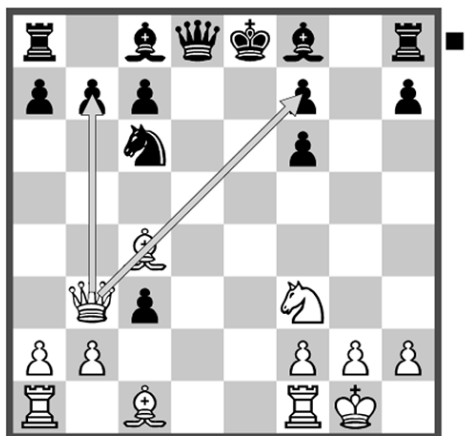
White reinforces their center. Black would love to provoke some weaknesses like g3 with **D1)** 8...Rg8 and then start bothering White with ...Bg4, but as the rook maneuver loses some time White can even afford to sacrifice the g2-pawn. 9.Qc2! Rxc2 10.Be3



*Position after: 10.Be3*

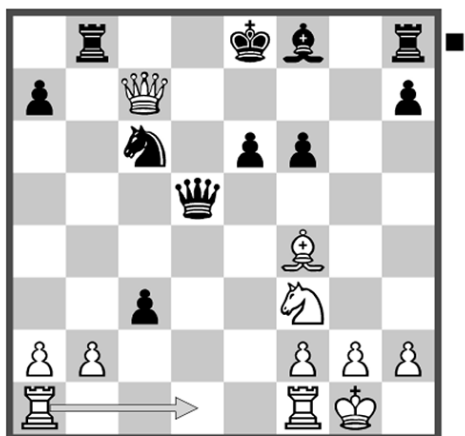
Black has lost way too much time and their position is already very unpleasant. The attacker will quickly castle and start exerting enormous pressure in the center while the previously intended 10...Bg4? loses material immediately to 11.Nh4!

**D2)** 8...exd4 is risky as Black's king will feel very uncomfortable in an open position. 9.0-0 Be6 [9...dxc3 10.Qb3!



*Position after: 10.Qb3!*

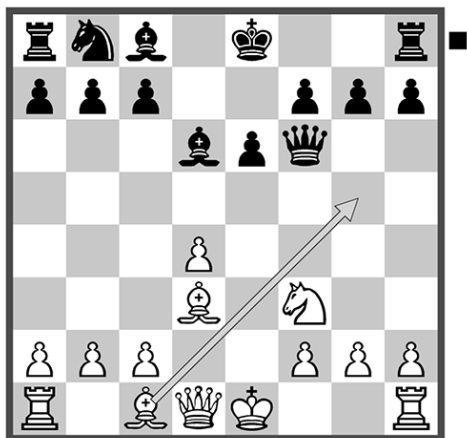
is simply winning as Black cannot defend both the f7 and b7 weaknesses. 10...Qe7 11.Re1 Be6 12.Qxb7+-] 10.Bxe6 fxe6 11.Qb3 Qd5 12.Qxb7 Rb8 13.Qxc7 dxc3 14.Bf4!±  
 White intends to continue with Rad1 and there is no time for Black to capture on b2. Most likely White will emerge a pawn up.



*Position after: 14.Bf4!±*

**6.Bd3 Bd6 7.Nf3**



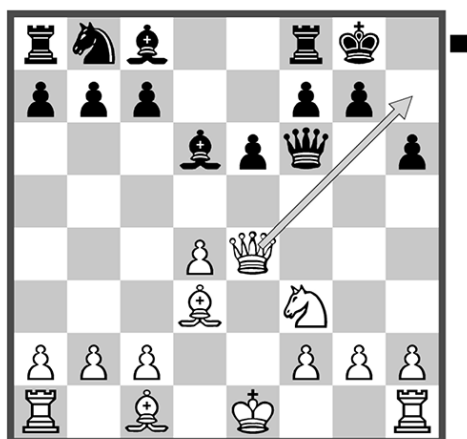


*Position after: 7.Nf3*

With the idea of Bg5, trapping the queen.

**7...h6 8.Qe2<sup>2</sup>**

White has a pleasant edge. Black will eventually have to lose more time maneuvering the f6-queen to a better square, and it is not the only problem they have. They still cannot castle due to 8...0-0 9.Qe4!

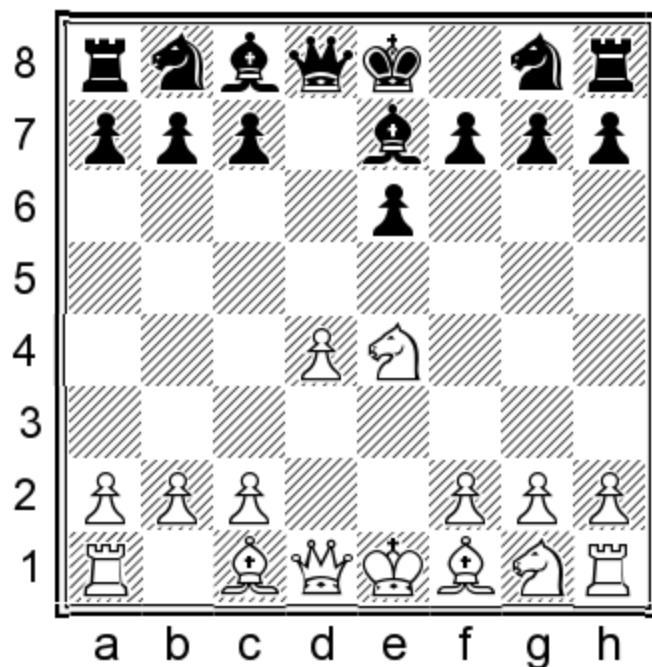


*Position after: 9.Qe4!*

as there is no good way to cover the terrible check on h7.

### c) 4...Be7

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Be7**



*Position after: 4...Be7*

As with most of the set-ups in the lines with ...dxe4, developing with Bd3, Nf3, followed by 0-0 is good for White here too. White can even choose their move order as both Bd3 and Nf3 should lead to the same thing.

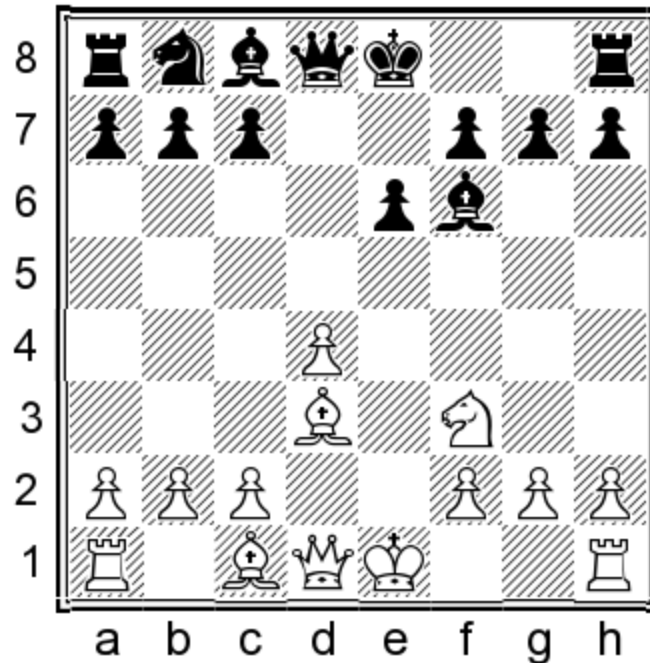
### **5.Bd3**

5.Nf3 Nf6 6.Nxf6+ Bxf6 7.Bd3 is another way to reach the same position.

### **5...Nf6 6.Nxf6+ Bxf6 7.Nf3**

Black managed to exchange the e4-knight without having to play ...Qxf6 or ...gxf6, but the bishop is also not such a

great piece on f6. It only barks at the well-protected d4-pawn and obstructs way for the queen's knight.



*Position after: 7.Nf3*

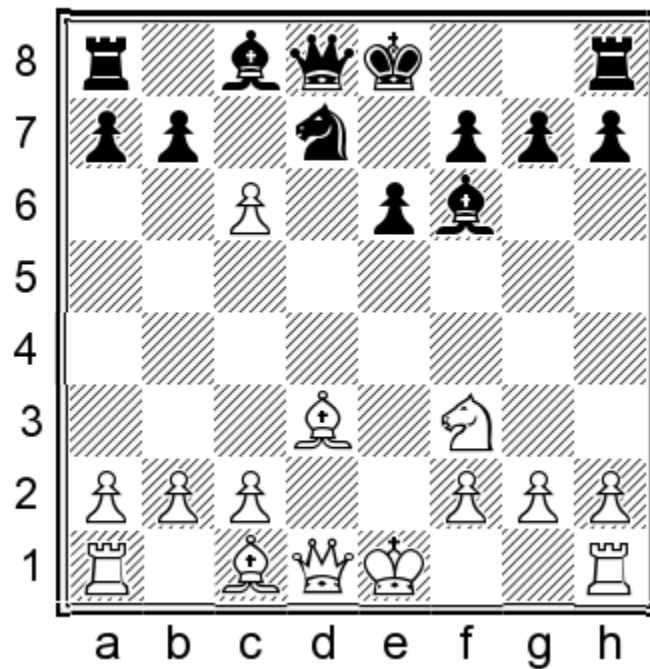
**7...c5**

This is a logical push, otherwise Black remains rather passive.

**A)** 7...Bxd4? 8.Nxd4 Qxd4 9.Bb5++- is a trick you will definitely see a lot in this chapter.

**B)** 7...Nd7 is analyzed via the 4...Nd7 5.Nf3 Be7 6.Bd3 Nf6 7.Nxf6+ Bxf6 move order.

**8.dxc5 Nd7 9.c6!?**



*Position after: 9.c6!?*

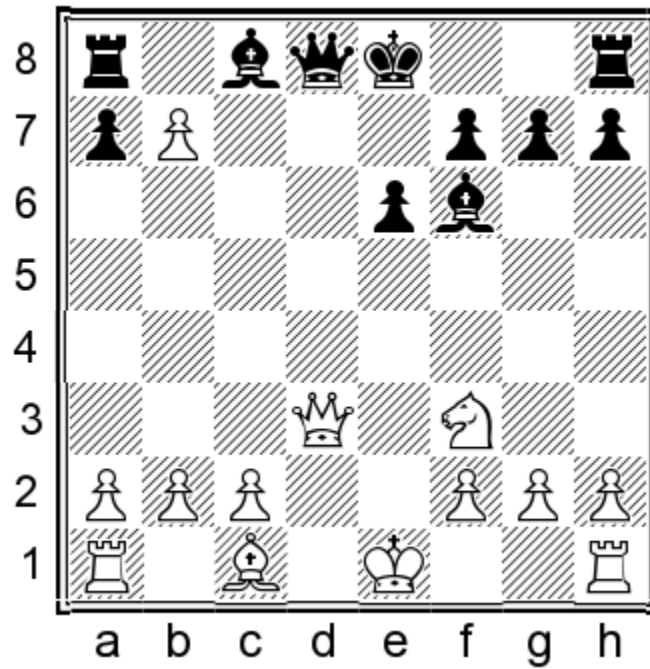
White cannot really hold the extra pawn but they can use it to gain a safe advantage by damaging Black's pawn structure.

### **9...Nc5**

Sacrificing a pawn for the bishop pair and activity.

9...bxc6 10.0-0 0-0 11.Qe2<sup>2</sup> leaves the first player with a very good position. White can play for an attack on the kingside or just improve in the center. White's chances are preferable even in endgames because of the split queenside pawns.

### **10.cxb7 Nxd3+ 11.Qxd3**

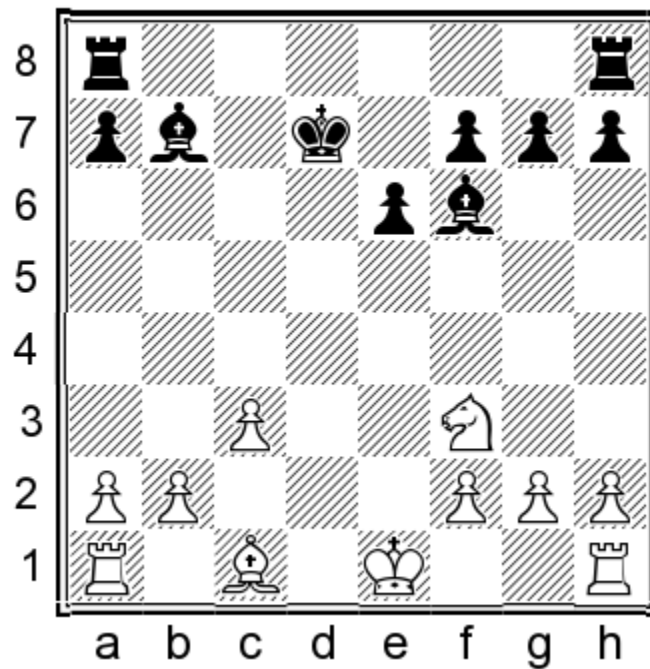


*Position after: 11.Qxd3*

**11...Bxb7**

11...Qxd3? leaves Black a rook down after White recycles their queen with 12.bxa8=Q+-.

**12.Qb5+ Qd7 13.Qxd7+ Kxd7 14.c3**

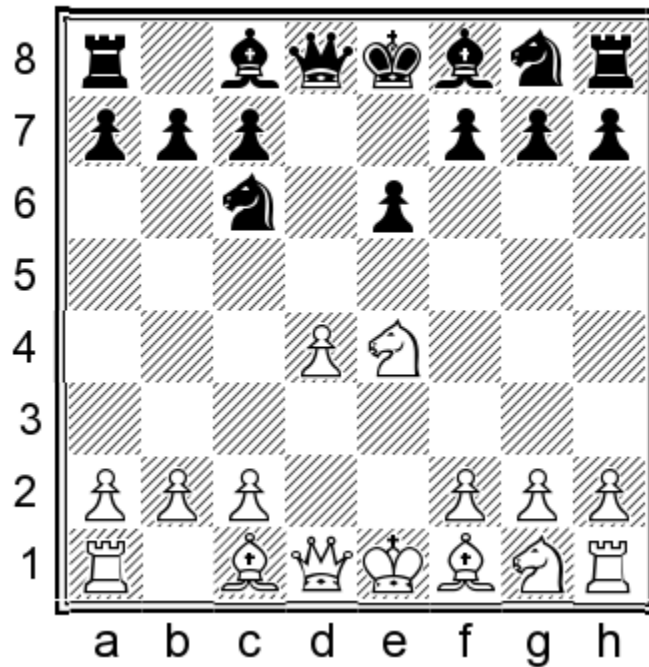


*Position after: 14.c3*

The engine claims that Black has sufficient compensation for the pawn. I think Black has some compensation, however it is up to them to prove it, and White can certainly play for advantage here, especially in a practical game.

**d) 4...Nc6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nc6**

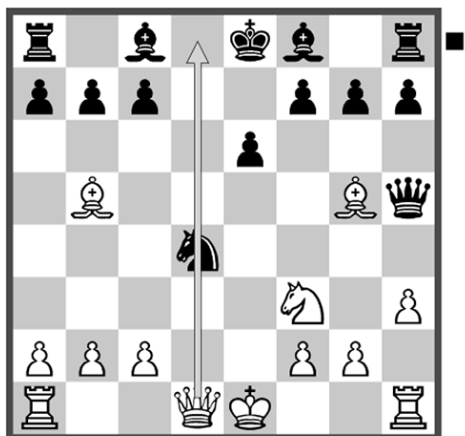


*Position after: 4...Nc6*

This has been played several times, most likely to avoid mainline theory.

**5.Nf3 Nf6 6.Nxf6+ gxf6**

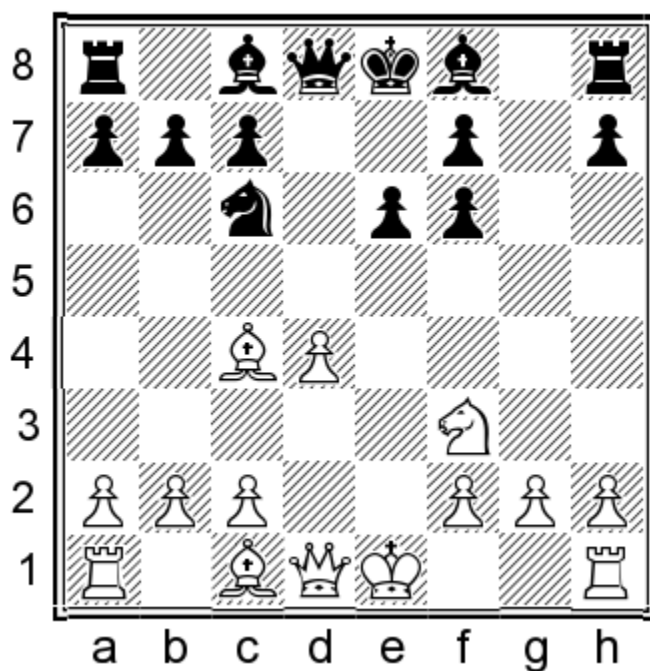
6...Qxf6 I do not think that anyone would play this way. However I could not resist showing you this variation because of nice tactics at the end of the line! 7.Bg5 Qg6 8.Bd3 Qh5 9.h3 Nxd4 This move would solve all of Black's problems if not for White's next move. [Objectively Black has to play 9...f6 and accept they are much worse 10.Be3<sup>2</sup>] 10.Bb5+!!



*Position after: 10.Bb5+!!*

Suddenly Black is completely busted due to the threat of mate on d8. 10...c6 11.Qxd4 cxb5 [11...f6 12.Bc4 fxg5 13.0-0-0 is also terrible as Black cannot stop White's queen from penetrating their position.] 12.Qd8#

**7.Bc4<sup>2</sup>**



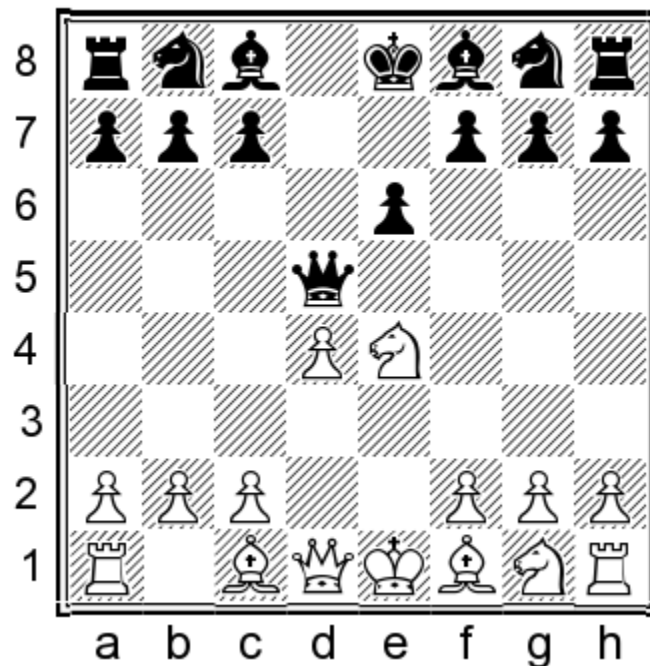


*Position after: 7.Bc4<sup>2</sup>*

White's ideas are simple here. In most cases they go for 0-0 and open the center. Even if Black wins the g2-pawn, they still need to solve many issues related to their king. This position we have already covered via the 3...Nf6 move order.

**e) 4...Qd5**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Qd5**



*Position after: 4...Qd5*

I am quite surprised that such a move was played 600+ times!

A simple approach for countering this kind of moves is always the best. Develop pieces, occupy the center, and

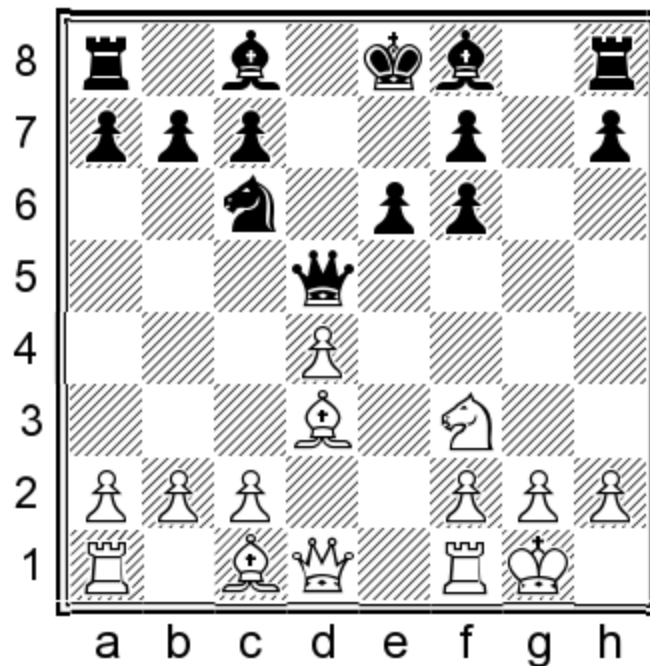
play for the spatial advantage. If Black could get away with such moves then chess would have no logic at all.

### **5.Bd3 Nf6 6.Nxf6+ gxf6**

This is the main reaction to 5.Bd3 but the whole concept looks very dubious for Black.

### **7.Nf3 Nc6 8.0-0**

White has finished their development and they are ready to launch the c4 pawn, forcing the unfortunately placed queen on d5 to lose even more time.

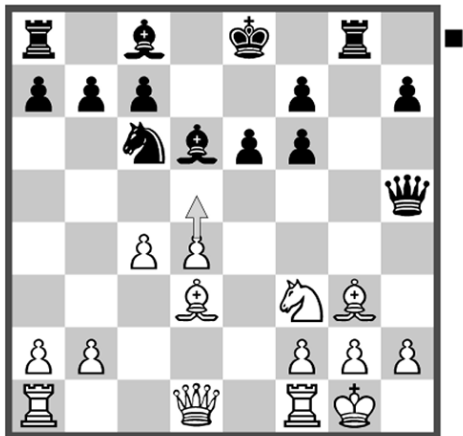


*Position after: 8.0-0*

On the other hand Black has managed to develop only their queen and the c6-knight so far...

### **8...Bd7**

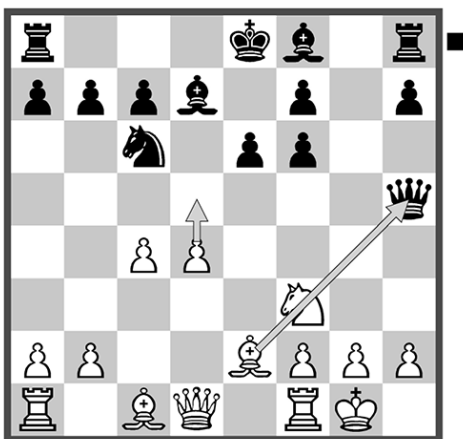
**A) 8...Rg8** Black could have some surprising blow on the g-file here so we first destroy all their hopes with 9.c4 Qh5 10.Bf4! Bd6 11.Bg3 and then continue the attack with d5.



*Position after: 11.Bg3*

**B) 8...Nxd4?** loses material immediately 9.Nxd4 Qxd4 10.Bb5+!+-.

**9.c4 Qh5 10.Be2!**



*Position after: 10.Be2!*

White is extending the scope of their queen so that it would support the d5-push, at the same time gaining more tempi by indirectly hitting the queen. If her majesty insists on staying on h5, problems may arise, such as...

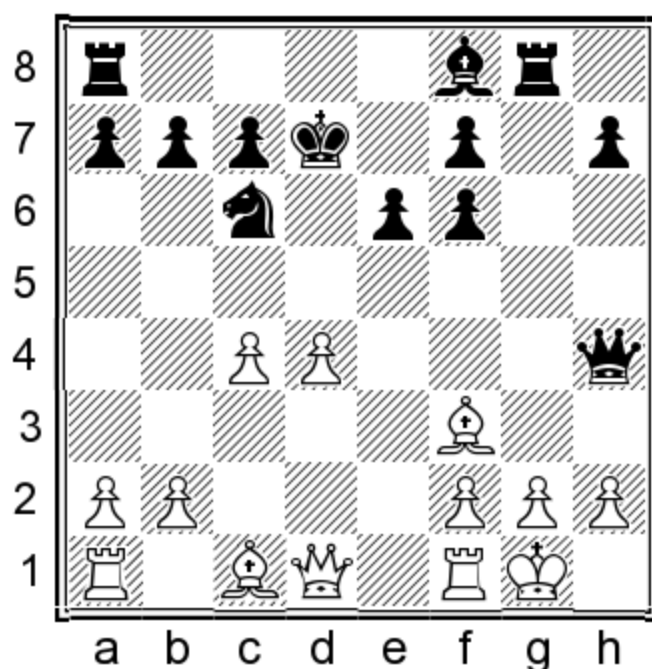
**10...Rg8 11.Ne5!**

And Black's king will get stuck in the center.

**11...Qh4 12.Nxd7 Kxd7**

White has a great bishop pair, a better pawn structure, and an advantage in the center, whilst Black's coordination is just terrible.

**13.Bf3**



*Position after: 13.Bf3*

**13...Bd6**

**A)** 13...Nxd4 is not winning a pawn due to 14.g3 Kc8 [14...c5 15.Bxb7 is also quite horrible with the king on d7.] 15.Kh1!+- and it is Black who is losing material.

**B)** The other capture 13...Qxd4 is even worse 14.Bxc6+! Kxc6 15.Qxd4+-.

### **14.g3!**

There is no real counter attack on the kingside for Black and their own king will be dealt with swiftly after a quick c5 and d5.

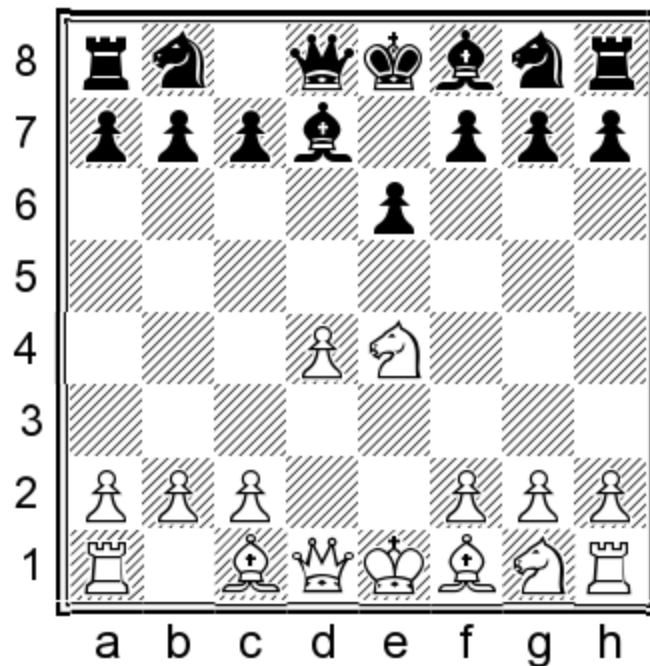
### **14...Nxd4?**

is still impossible due to

**15.Bg2 Qg4 16.f3!+- and the knight is gone.**

**f) 4...Bd7 & 6...Nf6**

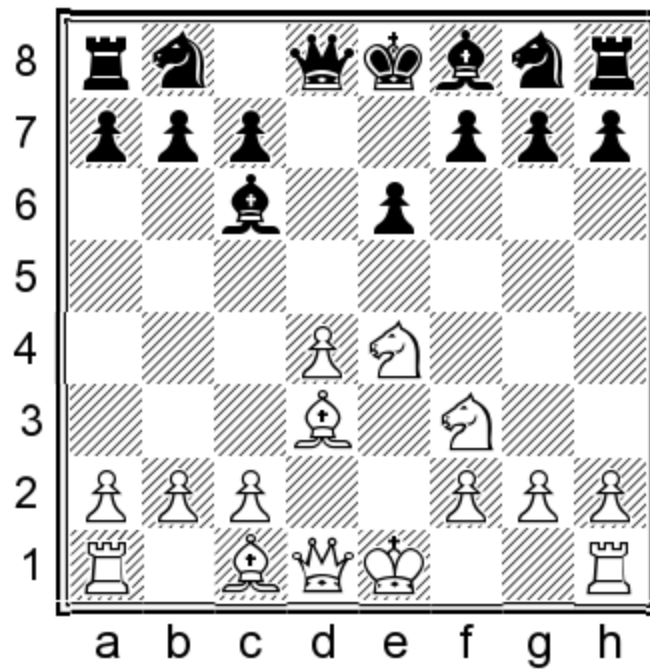
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Bd7**



*Position after: 4...Bd7*

I have played this move myself a few times, just to avoid theory and get a different position. Most of the variations I gave here end up with Black giving up the bishop pair advantage. There are no immediate material gains or mating threats for White, but their play is much simpler thanks to the spatial advantage and the bishop pair.

**5.Nf3 Bc6 6.Bd3**

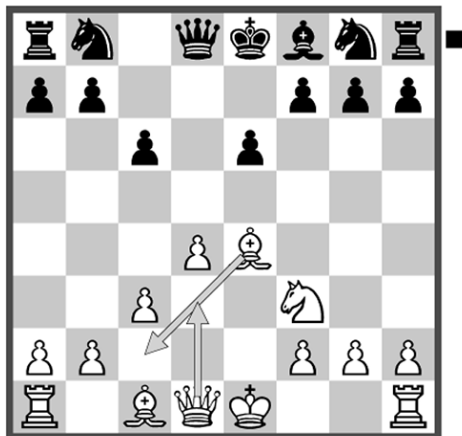


*Position after: 6.Bd3*

## 6...Nf6

runs into a well-known trap.

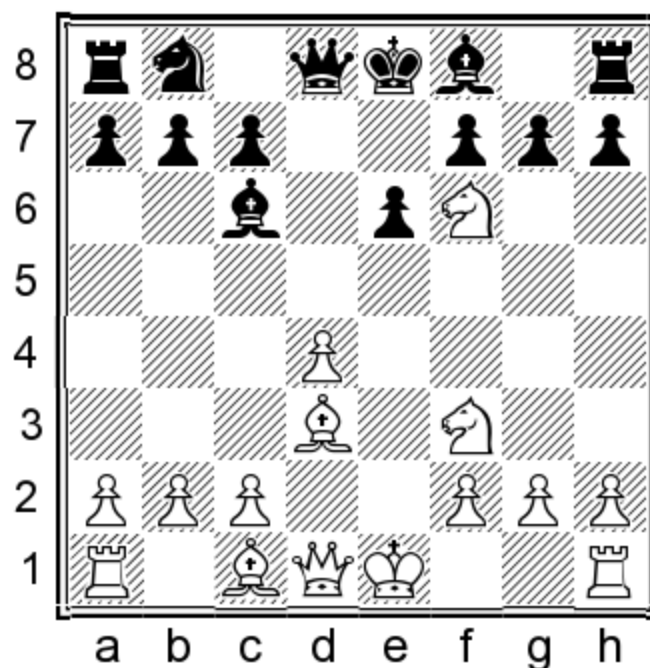
6...Bxe4 Black is usually trying to delay the light-squared bishop exchange for as long as possible so this move can benefit only White. 7.Bxe4 c6 8.c3!



*Position after: 8.c3!*

Quite an important move, White's position will be much more harmonious with the bishop on c2. It gives White much better control over the central d4-square and it also prepares a future bishop and queen battery. A wise general never sends their artillery to the front line but bombards the enemy from a safe distance instead. 8...Nf6 9.Bc2 Bd6 10.0-0 Qc7 11.g3!<sup>2</sup> A multifunctional move. Generally it is a good idea to exchange as many pieces as possible when you have less space so the main point of this pawn move is to stop ...Bf4. Secondly, White is gaining more space on the kingside. Black can achieve a similar structure from multiple lines, but as a rule White is better thanks to their bishop pair. It is quite nice to get such a stable advantage at such an early stage of the game.

**7.Nxf6+**



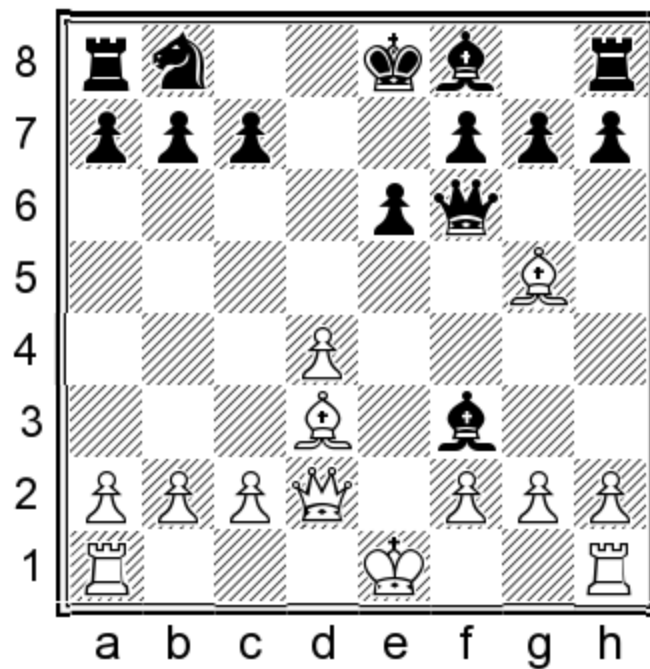


*Position after: 7.Nxf6+*

### **7...gxf6**

This is the better of Black's options, but this structure is not so rosy for them as we've already seen in the variation with 3...Nf6. They are much worse here.

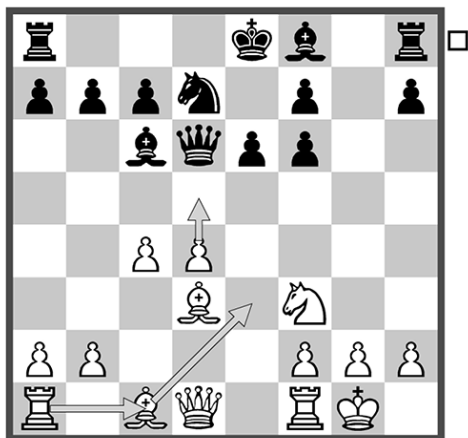
7...Qxf6 8.Bg5 Bxf3 9.Qd2!

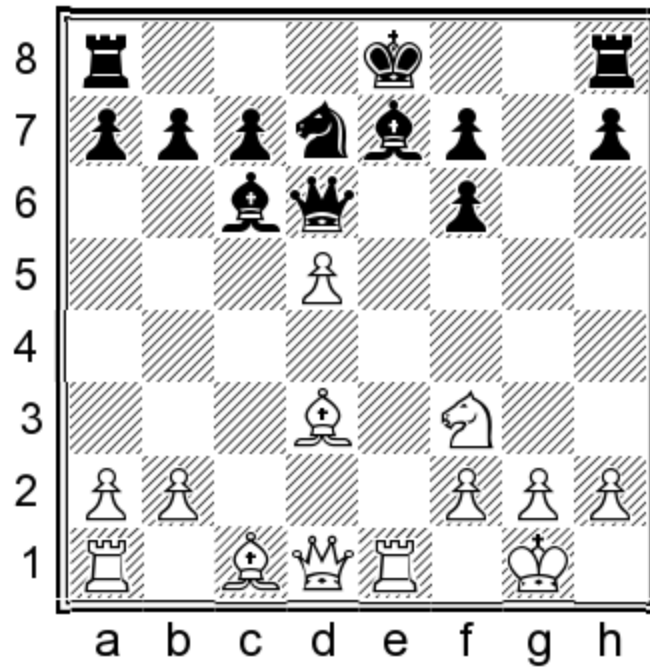


*Position after: 9.Qd2!*

Black's queen is trapped because if 9...Qxd4 10.Bb5+!+-.

**8.0-0 Qd6 9.c4 Nd7**



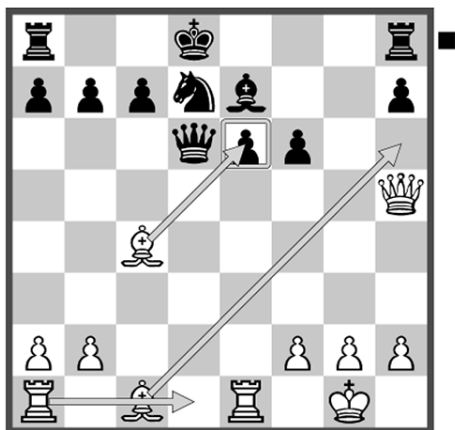


*Position after: 12.cxd5*

## 12...Qxd5

12...Bxd5 13.Nd4 eyeing the f5-square, is also quite nasty.

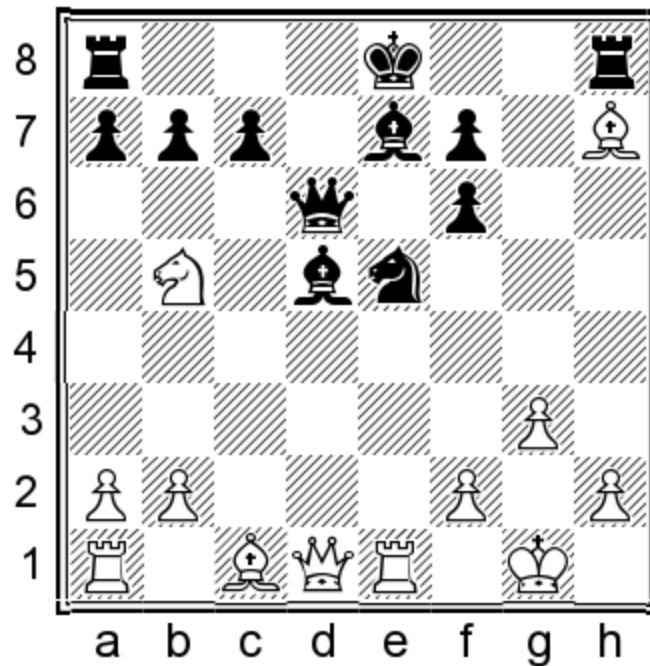
**A)** It is not possible to cover f5 with something like 13...Be6 as 14.Nxe6 fxe6 15.Qh5+ Kd8 16.Bc4+-



*Position after: 16.Bc4+- leaves Black simply too uncoordinated and weakened. White is already threatening*

*to rip the opponent's defenses apart by capturing on e6, and Black cannot even hope for redemption with their king stuck on d8.*

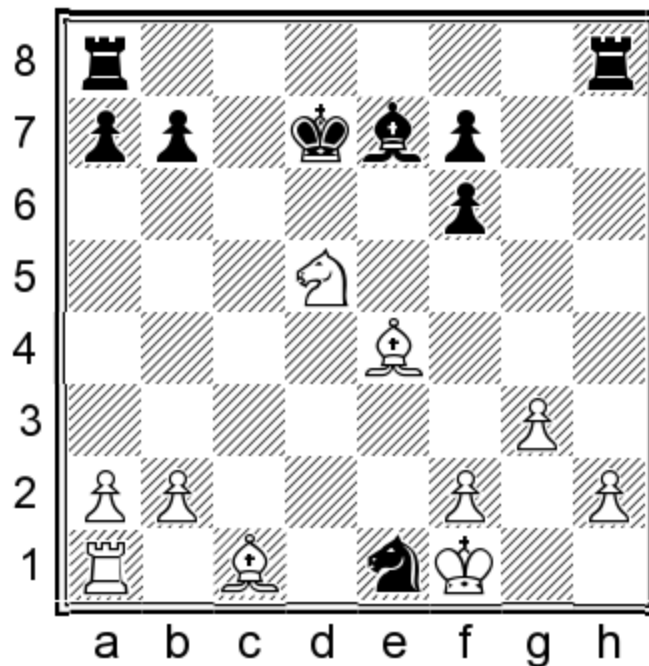
**B)** 13...Rg8 14.g3 Ne5 Black provoked a weakening of the f3-square so Nf5 is not that appealing anymore. White can simply collect the h7-pawn though. 15.Bxh7 Rh8 16.Nb5!



*Position after: 16.Nb5!*

Simplifying into a favorable endgame.

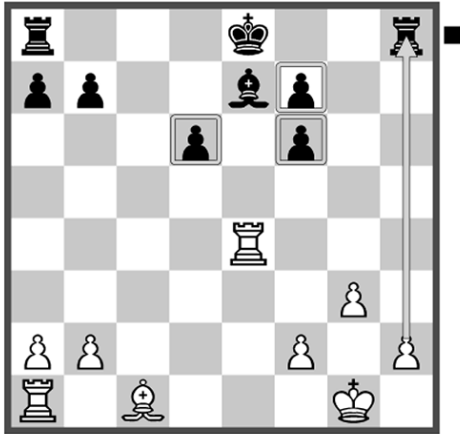
**B1)** 16...Qc5 17.Qxd5! is winning a pawn as 17...Qxd5 18.Nxc7+ Kd7 19.Nxd5 Nf3+ 20.Kf1 Nxe1 21.Be4



*Position after: 21.Be4*

does not work for Black – the knight is almost trapped and White’s pieces are too active. In case you were wondering whether the position was so clear after 21...f5, it might not be so easy to trap the e1-knight after all, but Black’s king will have to start a suicidal journey after 22.Bxf5+ Kd6 23.Nc3 Nf3 24.Bf4+ Kc5 25.Be3+ when the king is under all kinds of threats in the center. Even if you do not see anything concrete it should be enough to realize that White has already collected two pawns for the exchange which is usually pretty good compensation anyway. Also, the attack continues of course.

**B2)** 16...Nf3+ 17.Qxf3 Bxf3 18.Nxd6+ cxd6 19.Be4 Bxe4 20.Rxe4



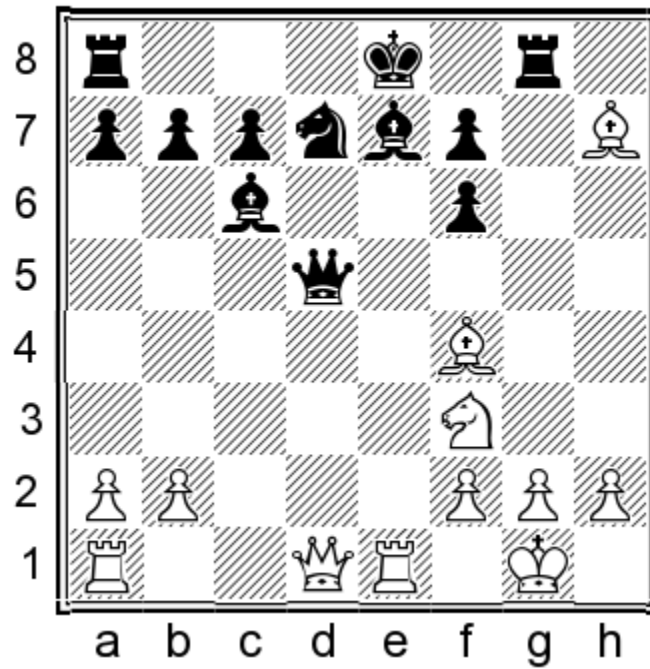
*Position after: 20.Rxe4*

Black's terrible pawn structure and White's passed pawn on the h-file guarantee that this will be a very tough position for the defender.

### **13.Bf4!**

Covering the e5-square. Black cannot castle queenside because of the hanging e7-bishop, and the c7-pawn is hanging as well. They also cannot develop the h8-rook with 13...Rg8

because White once again goes for the simple 14.Bxh7!±

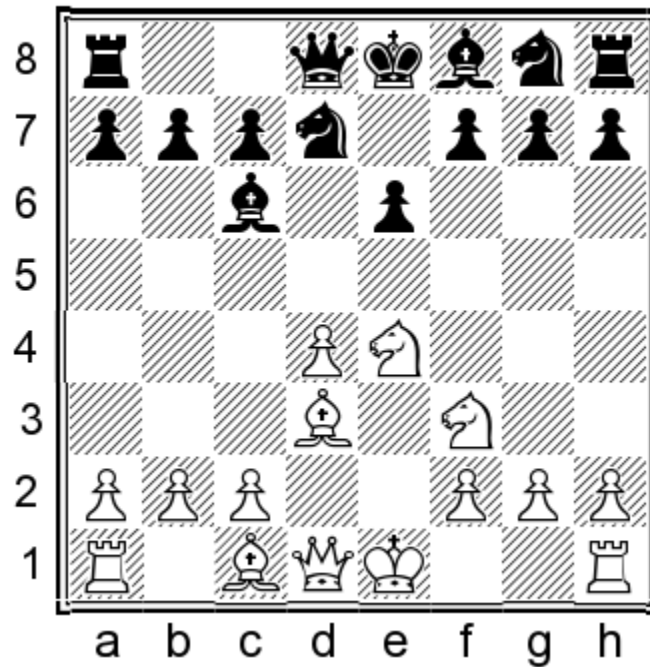


*Position after: 14.Bxh7!±*

with a very pleasant endgame.

**g) 4...Bd7 & 6...Nd7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Bd7 5.Nf3 Bc6  
6.Bd3 Nd7**



*Position after: 6...Nd7*

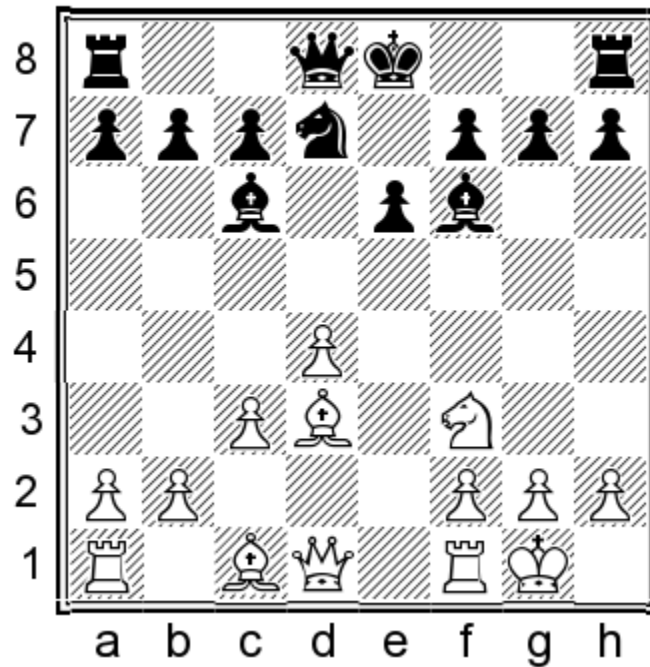
### **7.c3!**

7.0-0?! is the main move according to my database but here we should be precise about our move order. Castling is a serious imprecision as the queen-trapping combination does not work after 7...Ngf6 8.Nxf6+ Qxf6! 9.Bg5? Bxf3 10.Qd2 and because the d4-square is not under control, Black can safely play 10...Qxd4-+.

### **7...Ngf6**

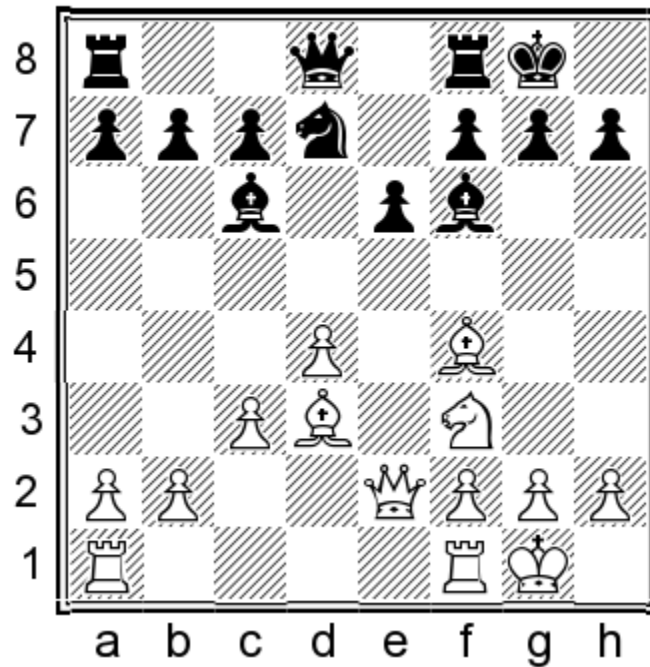
Taking with the bishop after 7...Be7 8.0-0 Ngf6 9.Nxf6+ Bxf6





*Position after: 9...Bxf6*

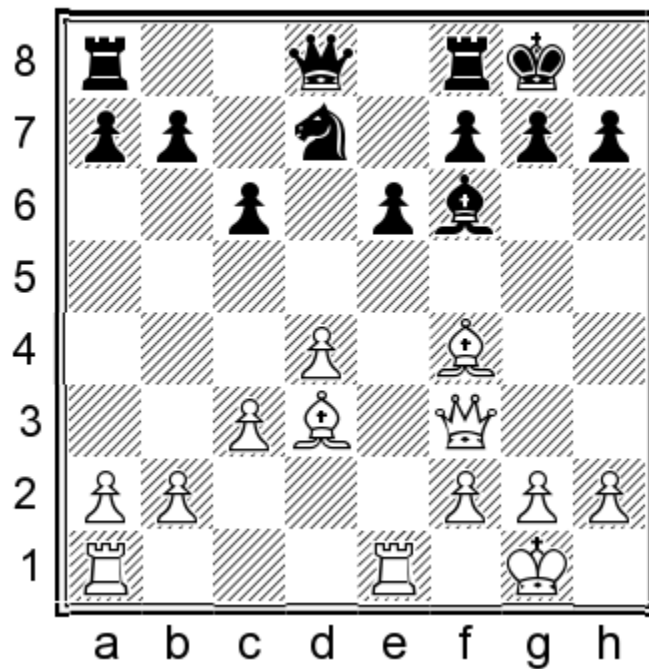
does not change the general trend. [9...Nxf6 transposes into 7...Ngf6.] 10.Qe2 Only when we threaten to play Ne5 will Black be forced to finally capture on f3 and consolidate White's advantage, therefore White prepares the maneuver by increasing their control over the e5-square. [10.Re1 is possible too but it feels more natural to move the queen first as it is useful to have the option of Rd1 in reserve.] 10...0-0 11.Bf4 [11.Ne5 does not work yet due to 11...Nxe5 12.dxe5 Qd5! and White has to play the ugly 13.f4 move, limiting their bishop and weakening the dark squares in their camp.]



*Position after: 11.Bf4*

**A)** After, say, 11...a5 the ...Qd5 maneuver can still be a bit awkward, so White will complete one final preparatory move. 12.Rad1! Now Ne5 is a serious positional threat so ...Bxf3 has to come one way or another. Here we see the value of the Qe2 set-up. Note that recklessness is inadvisable for Black as 12...h6? 13.Ne5! Nxe5 14.dxe5 Qd5 15.Bh7+!+- highlights the strength of the move Rad1 rather well.

**B)** 11...Bxf3 Black is running out of non-committal moves and accepts the inevitable. 12.Qxf3 c6 13.Rfe1



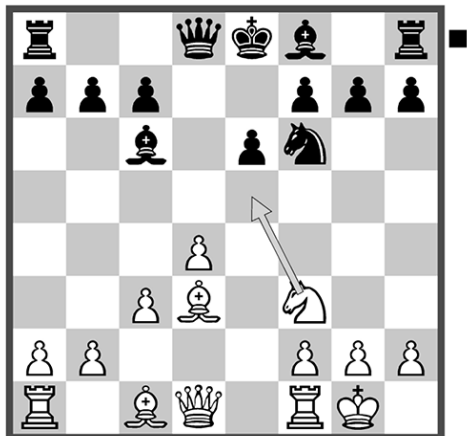
*Position after: 13.Rfe1*

13...g6 [13...Bg5 would be nice for Black if White had to exchange the bishops but after 14.Qh5! h6 15.Bg3 Black has only succeeded in creating a terrible weakness on h6 and weakening the b1-h7 diagonal.] 14.h3!<sup>2</sup> Once again stopping any bishop exchanging ideas because the dark-squared bishop now has the h2-square. White has a pleasant advantage and can continue to expand on both wings with a2-a4 on the queenside and, after the bishop or the queen move away from the d8-h4 diagonal, with g3 and h4 on the kingside. White can maneuver endlessly and even play in the center (for example by slowly preparing c4 and d5), whereas Black does not really want to open the position because White's bishop pair would clearly be even stronger.

**8.Nxf6+ Nxf6**

8...Qxf6? 9.Bg5 Bxf3 10.Qd2!+- works as expected here thanks to playing c3 instead of 0-0.

### 9.0-0

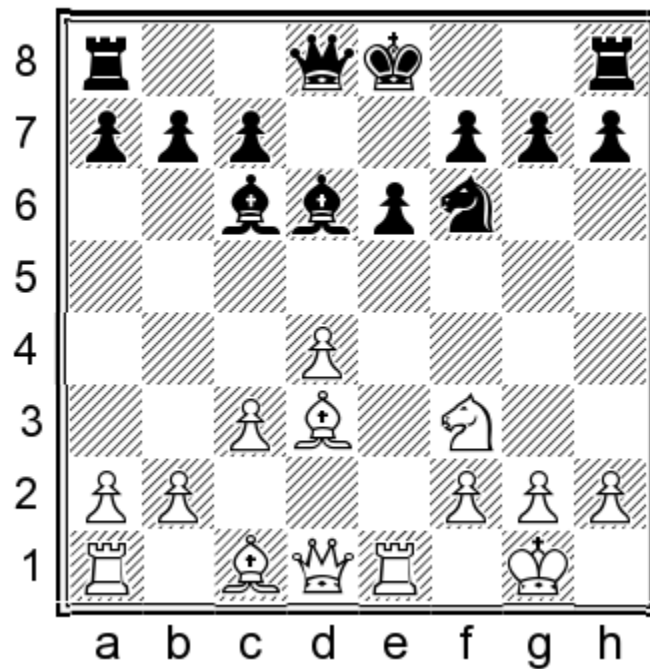


*Position after: 9.0-0*

Here too White's plan is to make Black capture on f3 by threatening them with the possibility of Ne5, and then enjoy the spatial and bishop pair advantages.

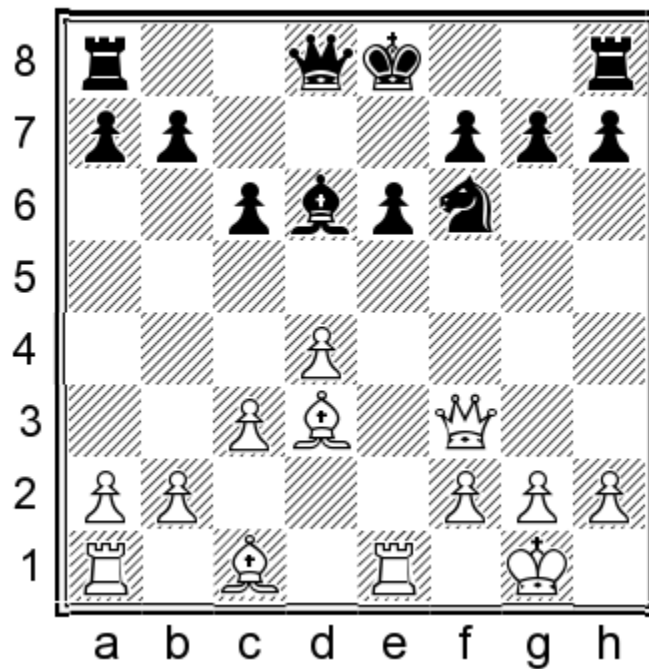
### 9...Be7

**A)** 9...Bd6 takes the e5-square under some control but White has the simple 10.Re1



*Position after: 10.Re1*

Now the threat of Ne5 is renewed. In a similar position arising from 7...Be7, where Black's knight was placed on d7, we opted for Qe2 instead, but here the move Re1 suffices, as Black does not have enough control of e5 with the knight already on f6. Because of the threat of Ne5 Black is forced to act. [10.Ne5? would be a grave error because of 10...Bxe5 11.dxe5 Qd5-+, hitting both g2 and e5.] 10...Bxf3 [Moving back again with 10...Nd7 would be silly. Since the kingside looks abandoned, we would continue with 11.Bc2 intending 11...0-0 12.Qd3!, targeting the h7-weakness.] 11.Qxf3 c6<sup>2</sup>

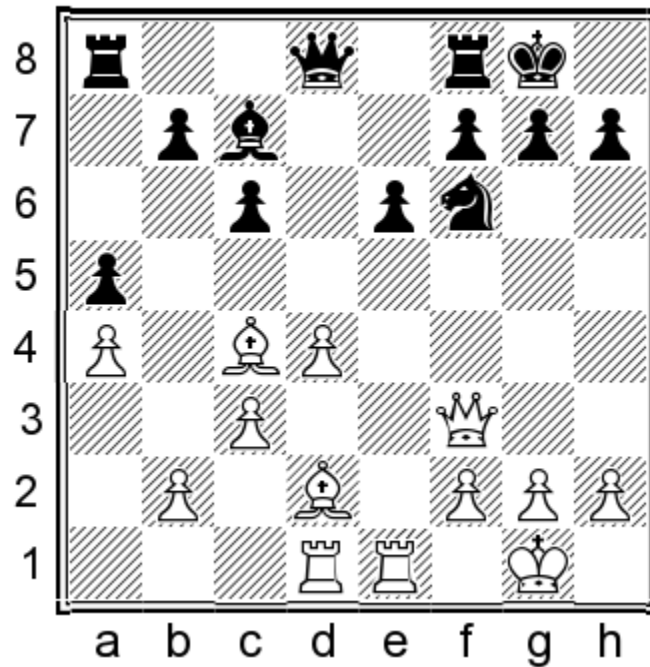


*Position after: 11...c6<sup>2</sup>*

White has a very stable edge in this type of position and the defender will suffer a lot. Let's have a look at how White can slowly improve their position. 12.a4 It's nice to gain more space on the queenside.

**A1)** 12...0-0 13.a5 is not very desirable for Black because they cannot tolerate the pawn going all the way to a6. They will have to play ...a6 themselves, but then their pawns will be stuck and the b6-square will be weak. White can even continue with b4, freezing the whole queenside.

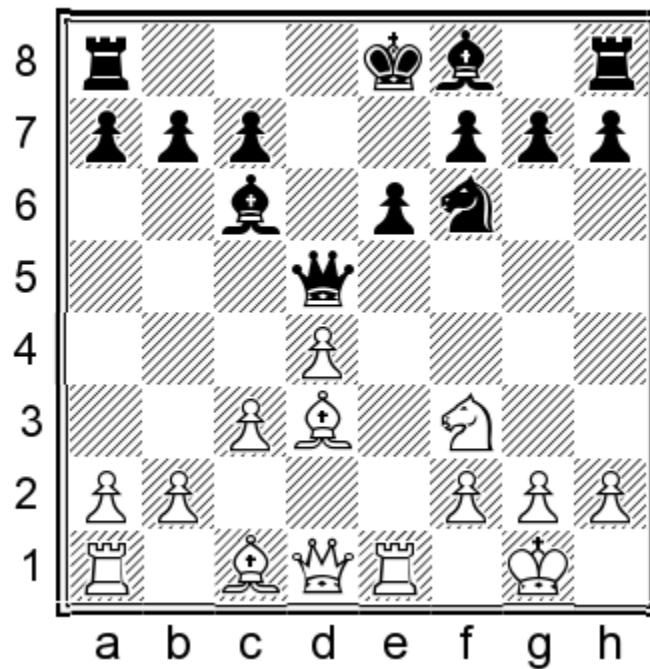
**A2)** 12...a5 13.Bd2 0-0 14.Rad1 Natural developing moves are enough. 14...Bc7 15.Bc4! Quite an important maneuver, stopping ...Qd5.



*Position after: 15.Bc4!*

As a rule if you have the spatial advantage you don't want to exchange pieces unless it brings you some very concrete benefits. White will slowly expand on the kingside with g3 and h4, and in an ideal scenario they'd like to provoke Black into play ...h6, after which Black would have to watch out for Bxh6 ideas all the time.

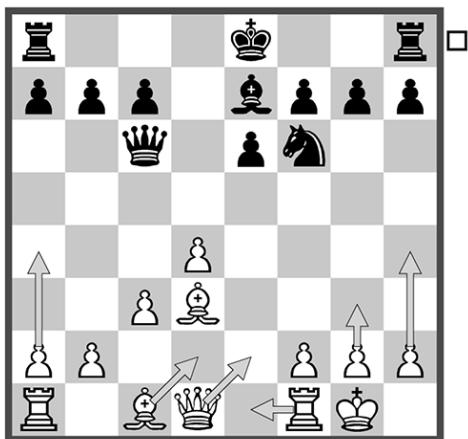
**B)** 9...Qd5 is cleverly trying to stop Ne5 because of the mating threat on g2, but 10.Re1! solves White's problems.



*Position after: 10.Re1!*

10...Be7 [It is true that 10...Bd6 stops Bf4 but after 11.c4 Qh5 12.d5 Black is in big trouble because they are not in time to find shelter for their king.] 11.Bf4 is quite awkward because of the hanging c7-pawn.

**10.Ne5 Qd5 11.Nxc6 Qxc6<sup>2</sup>**





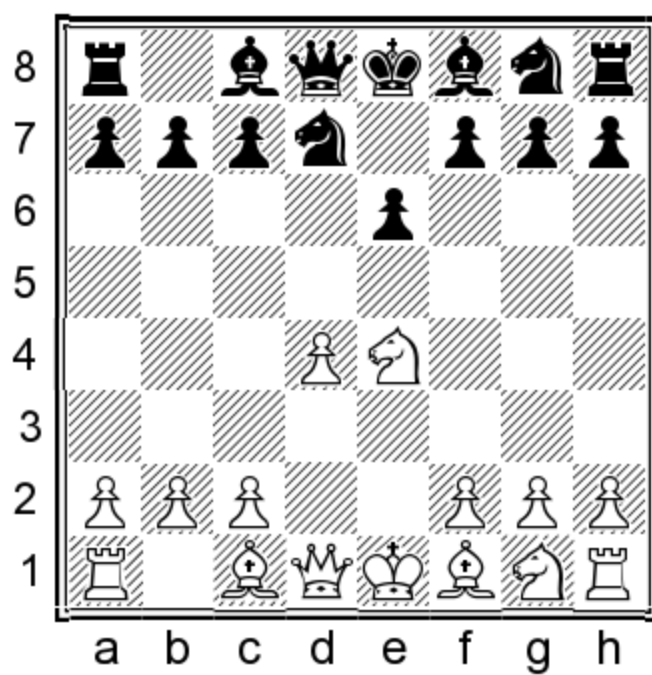
*Position after: 11...Qxc6<sup>2</sup>*

We've already seen a similar picture a few times before and the narrative remains the same. White keeps a comfortable advantage thanks to their bishop pair and more space, and after developing moves like Re1, Qe2, and Bd2 they will try to gain even more space on both wings by pushing their pawns (a4 on the queenside, and g3 and h4 on the kingside).

# Chapter 5

## Rubinstein 4...Nd7

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nd7



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 5 - Rubinstein 4...Nd7

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nd7 5.Nf3

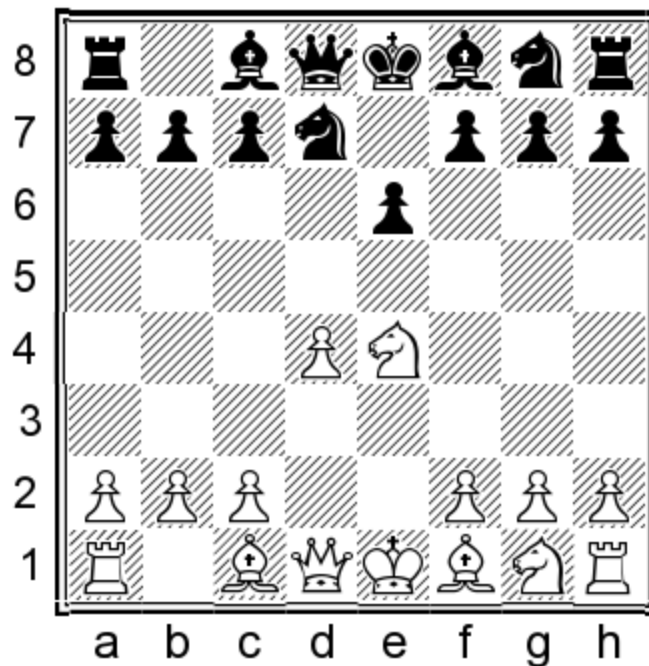
a) 5...Be7

b) 5...Ngf6 & 7...--

c) 5...Ngf6 & 7...Bd6

**a) 5...Be7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nd7**



*Position after: 4...Nd7*

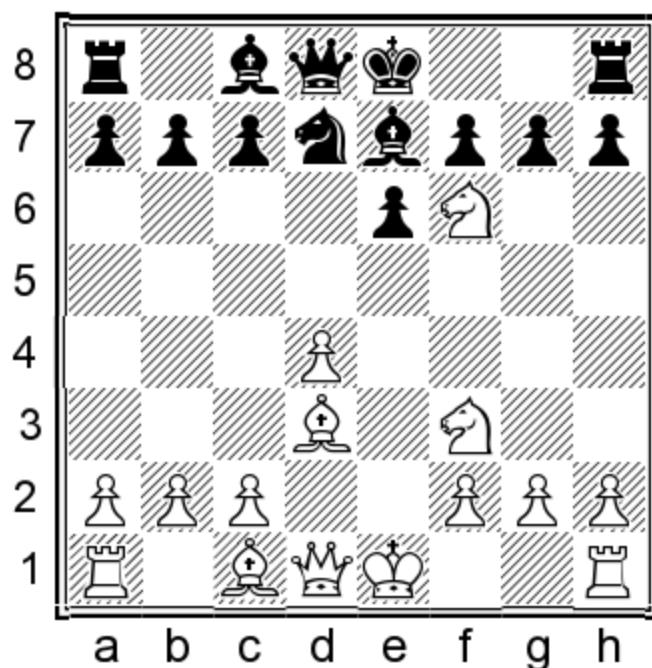
**5.Nf3**

This is where the heaviest theoretical discussions in the Rubinstein Variation take place, although we will be taking a slightly more refreshing approach. Note that here the move order is quite important for us and we should first develop our knight so that we keep the 7.Ne5 option against 5...Ngf6. Indeed, 5.Bd3 would throw us out of our repertoire instantly.

5.g4!? This is move for players who like to attack and sacrifice, it is not a big surprise that Alexei Shirov is one of its ardent fans. However I am a bit hesitant to recommend such a committal move at an early stage of the game.

### 5...Be7

Here we simply complete development with 6.Bd3 Ngf6  
7.Nxf6+



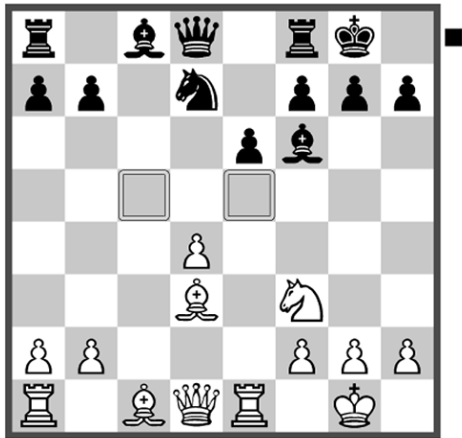
*Position after: 7.Nxf6+*

## 7...Nxf6

Recapturing with the bishop causes some disharmony in Black's camp as it is occupying Nd7's natural habitat.

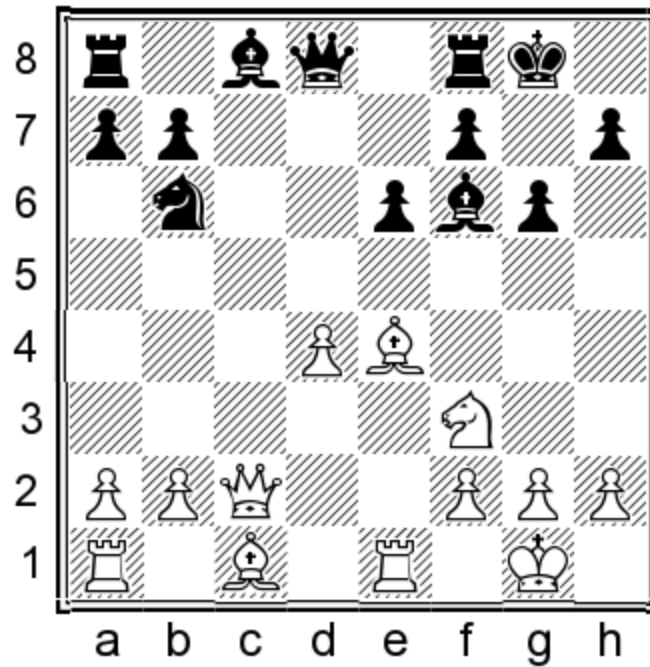
7...Bxf6 8.0-0

A) 8...0-0 is more restrained but White retains an edge with 9.Re1 c5 10.c3 cxd4 11.cxd4!



*Position after: 11.cxd4!*

This is a structure worth remembering. One might argue that White's d4-pawn is a weakness, but with so many pieces on the board piece activity is much more important and the d4-pawn limits Black's knight's scope perfectly. They have to develop awkwardly with ...Nb6 as ...f6 is unavailable and their position is rather cramped. Even yours truly has some bitter memories after 11...Nb6 [11...b6? loses immediately 12.Be4 Rb8 13.Bf4+- and the rook is trapped.] 12.Qc2 g6 13.Be4

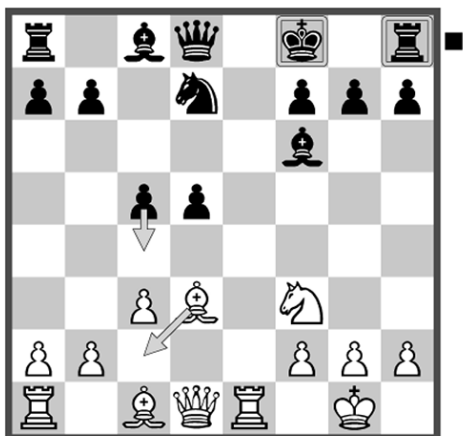


*Position after: 13.Be4*

as it is very hard to untangle, e.g. 13...Nd5 14.Bh6 Bg7 15.Bxg7 Kxg7 16.Rac1 Nf6 17.Qc7<sup>2</sup> with a pleasant endgame.

**B)** 8...c5 9.d5! It is of course possible to prepare the cxd4 recapture with c3 as in the previous note, but this is even stronger. One pawn is a small price for the damage we inflict to Black's coordination. 9...exd5 10.Re1+ Kf8 11.c3!

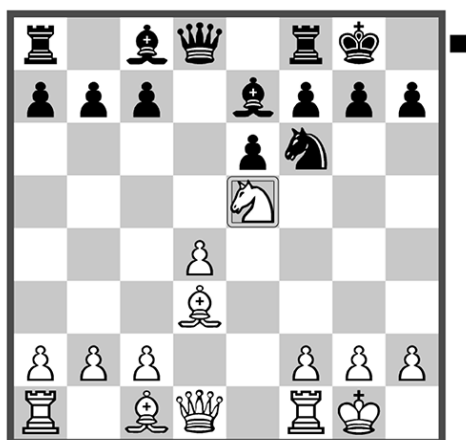
<sup>2</sup> We take the d4-square under control and secure a nice square on c2 for the d3-bishop in case of ...c4.



*Position after: 11.c3!²*

It will take Black a lot of time to harmonize the kingside and in the meantime we simply develop our pieces and start pressing, e.g. 11...c4 12.Bc2 Nc5 13.Be3 Ne6 14.Qd2 and while the pressure on the d5-pawn is mounting, Black's kingside is still completely stuck.

**8.0-0 0-0 9.Ne5!**



*Position after: 9.Ne5!*

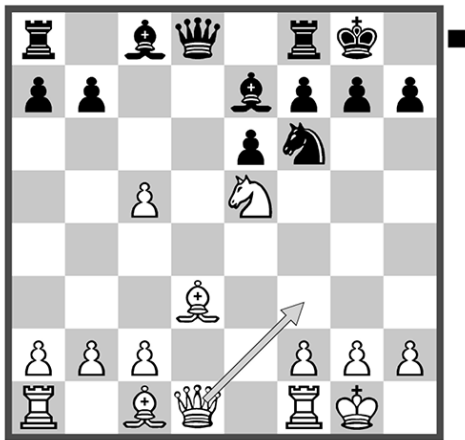
The e5-square is rather important in the Rubinstein Variation and often we see White fight to put their knight

there, and Black trying to come up with clever ways of discouraging the Nf3-e5 maneuver. Here White is getting it basically for free and it should not be difficult for them to keep an advantage.

### **9...c5**

The knight maneuver is possible thanks to the trap 9...Qxd4? 10.Bxh7+!+-.

### **10.dxc5**



*Position after: 10.dxc5*

The pawn push was the only way of challenging White's superiority in the center but in an open position the troubles of developing Black's queenside will come to light. Black would love to proceed with ...b6, ...Bb7, or ...Bd7-c6, however White always puts a lot of pressure on their position with a quick Qf3.

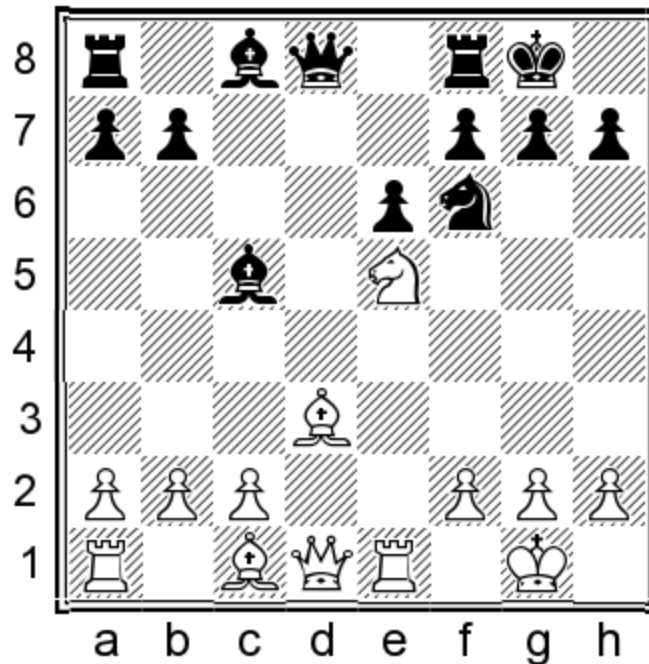
### **10...Bxc5**



This is the most natural reaction. But Black will run out of natural moves soon after White's next move.

10...Qc7 tries to keep the defender on e7 in place and recapture with the queen, but it does not work very well after 11.Bf4 Qxc5 12.c4 Rd8 13.Qf3<sup>2</sup>, intending Rad1 and Rfe1. At the same time Black cannot develop the queenside because the white queen on f3 is keeping the b7-pawn under constant surveillance.

### 11.Re1!

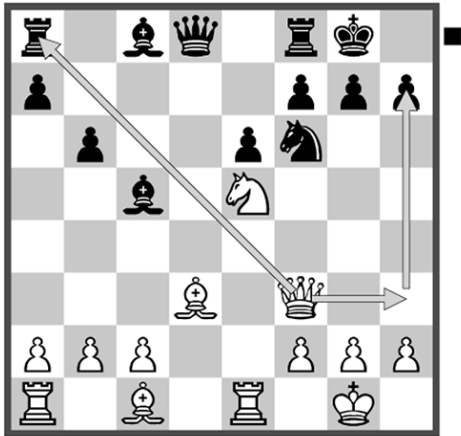


*Position after: 11.Re1!*

A very useful move, reinforcing the e5-knight. It is also keeping some flexibility should Black decide not to weaken the queenside with ...b6 or ...Bd7.

### 11...Qc7

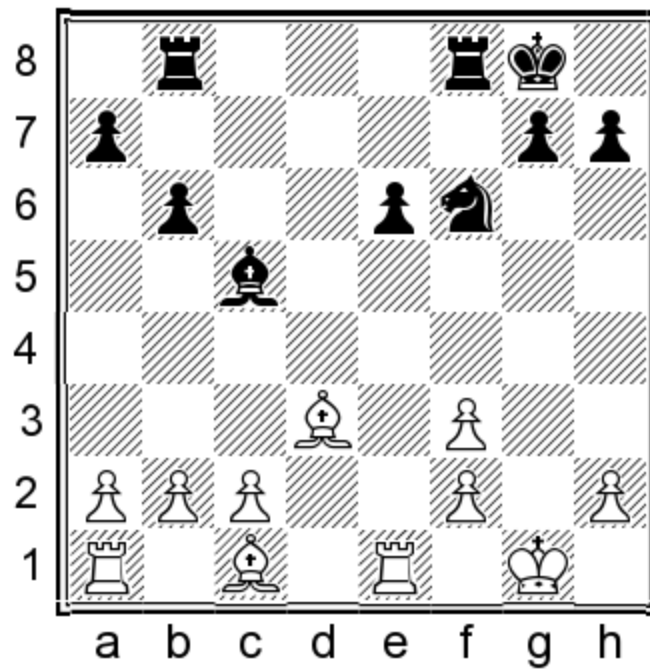
**A)** 11...b6 12.Qf3!



*Position after: 12.Qf3!*

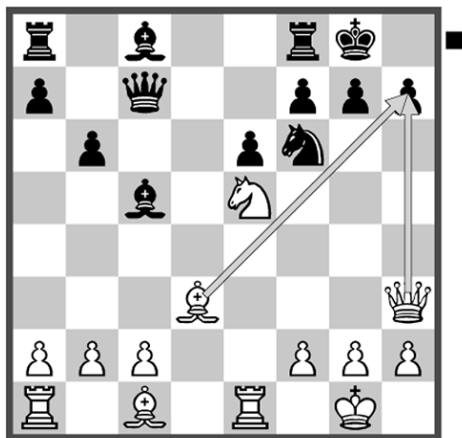
The queen maneuver is very powerful with the long diagonal weakened by ...b6, and Black has to sort out all kinds of problems. Not only is the rook hanging, but White also intends to start attacking the kingside with Qh3, targeting the h7-square.

**A1)** 12...Rb8 actually loses in more than one way; 13.Nc6 being the simplest, just picking up material after the exchanges. [13.Bg5 might be even stronger, just going for the attack with Qh3.] 13...Bb7 14.Nxd8 Bxf3 15.Nxe6 fxe6 16.gxf3±



*Position after: 16.gxf3±*

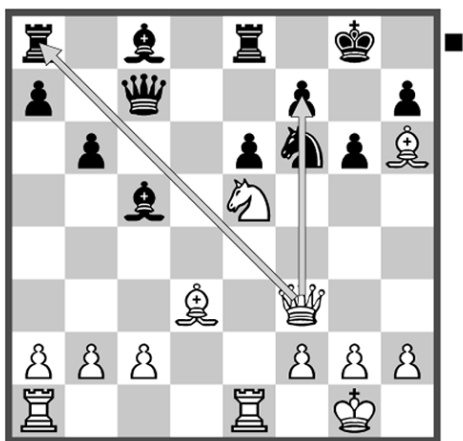
**A2)** 12...Qc7!? Black is trying to be smart but if White refuses the Greek gift, the attack simply continues.  
 13.Qh3! [13.Qxa8? suddenly gives Black decent chances as 13...Bb7 is not so terrible if White trades the queen for two rooks after Qxf8+, and 14.Qxa7 runs into 14...b5.]



*Position after: 13.Qh3!*

**A2.1)** 13...h6 Threatening to remove the only defender of the h7-pawn with Bg5 was already a terrible threat and 14.Bxh6! is not much of an improvement. 14...gxh6 15.Qxh6 Qe7 [or 15...Be7 16.Re3+-] 16.Nc6+- and the f6-defender drops off.

**A2.2)** 13...g6 14.Bh6 Black is forced to give up the rook because after 14...Re8 [14...Rd8 15.Bg5!+- pinning the rook as well, and only then Qf3.] 15.Qf3! is devastating.

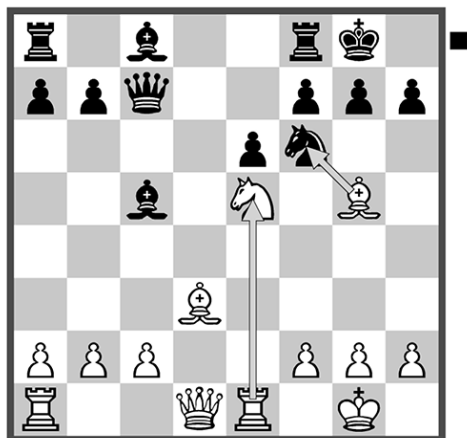


*Position after: 15.Qf3!*

The queen returns to f3 with a much greater effect as now the f7-square is very weak and the e8-rook is not protected in many lines, so the a8-rook might simply be hanging too. 15...Be7 [15...Nd5 16.c4+- and after the knight moves, White simply takes the a8-rook.; 15...Nh5 16.Qxa8 is simply bad now because the e8-rook is not protected anymore 16...Bb7 17.Qxe8++-.] 16.Bg5+- and Black cannot protect f6, f7, and a8 all at the same time.

**B)** 11...Bd7 12.Qf3! Qc7 13.Qh3 is quite similar to the ...b6 lines. White has a very strong attack.

**12.Bg5!**



*Position after: 12.Bg5!*

Making use of the fact that the e5-knight is protected and the queen is not protecting f6 anymore so White threatens to ruin Black's pawn formation.

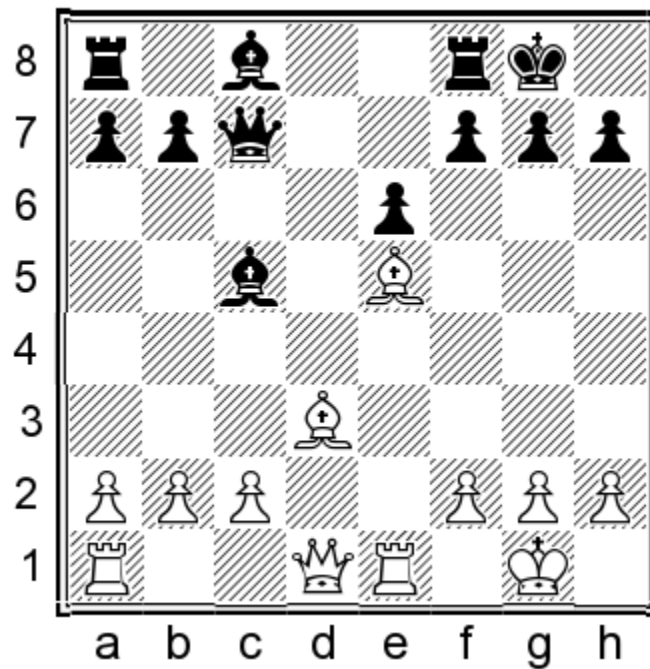
**12...Nd7**

This seems to exchange the dangerous attacker on e5, but White can put another dangerous piece there.

If 12...Nd5 the knight will be simply pushed back with 13.c4 Ne7 14.Qh5, and White's attack develops freely.

**13.Bf4 Nxe5 14.Bxe5**

It seems that whichever piece lands on e5 turns into a monster immediately.

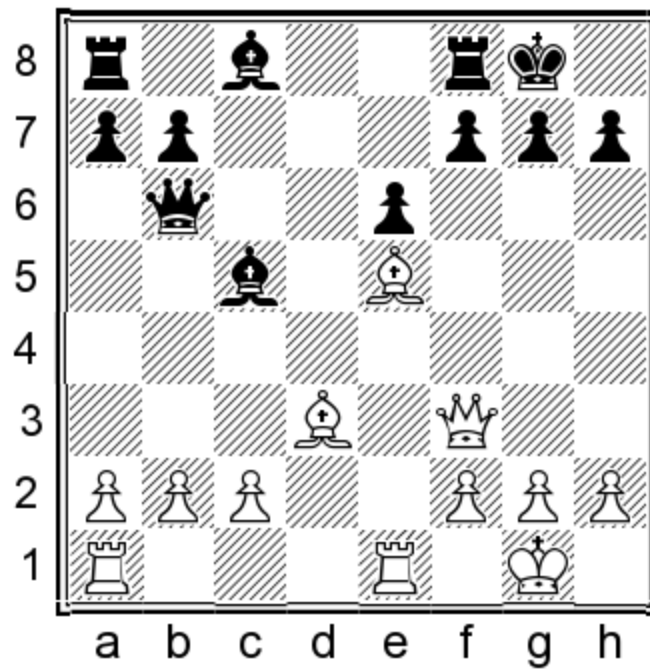


*Position after: 14.Bxe5*

**14...Qb6 15.Qf3!**

Defending the f2-square and moving another piece closer to the kingside.

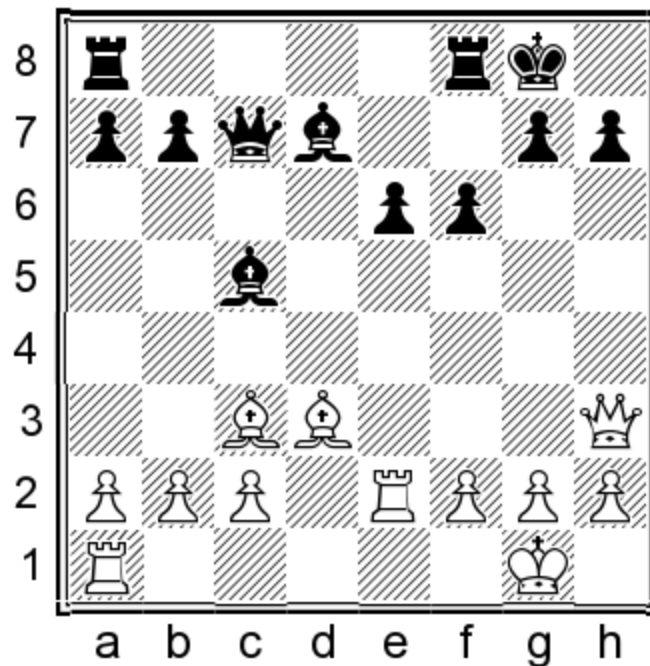
15.Bxh7+? is tempting but we should hold our horses because there is no mate after 15...Kxh7 16.Qh5+ Kg8 17.Bxg7 Kxg7 18.Qg5+ Kh7=, and White has only a draw.



*Position after: 15.Qf3!*

### **15...Bd7**

15...f6 16.Bc3 B d7 is a brave attempt for Black, but White will prepare the Qh3 sortie with 17.Re2!, protecting f2, and after 17...Qc7 18.Qh3



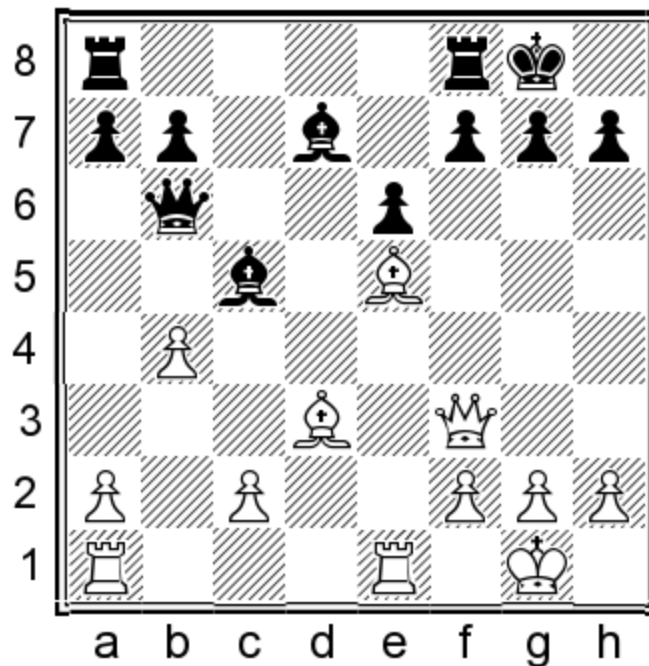
*Position after: 18.Qh3*

Black has to weaken their position even more, for example 18...f5 19.Be5 Bd6 20.Rae1± with a very pleasant position for White. Due to the terrible weakening of the e6-square White will switch to positional play and start besieging the e6-pawn with b3 and Bc4.

### **16.b4!**

Black still cannot develop normally as White has ideas to keep the initiative.





*Position after: 16.b4!*

### **16...Qxb4**

**A)** 16...Bxb4? is bad because the bishop will be first pinned 17.Rab1! Qa5 and then consumed by 18.Qe4!+–, hitting both h7 and b4.

**B)** Retreating does not lose immediately but White can simply build up with 16...Be7 17.a3±, with c4 to come.

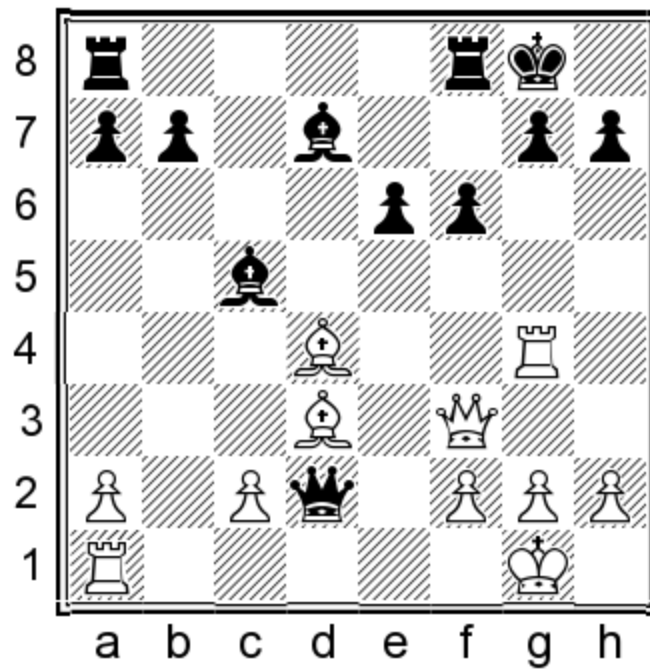
### **17.Re4**

Sacrificing one pawn for the sake of ambushing the kingside quickly.

### **17...Qd2 18.Rg4**

Matters are rather forced.

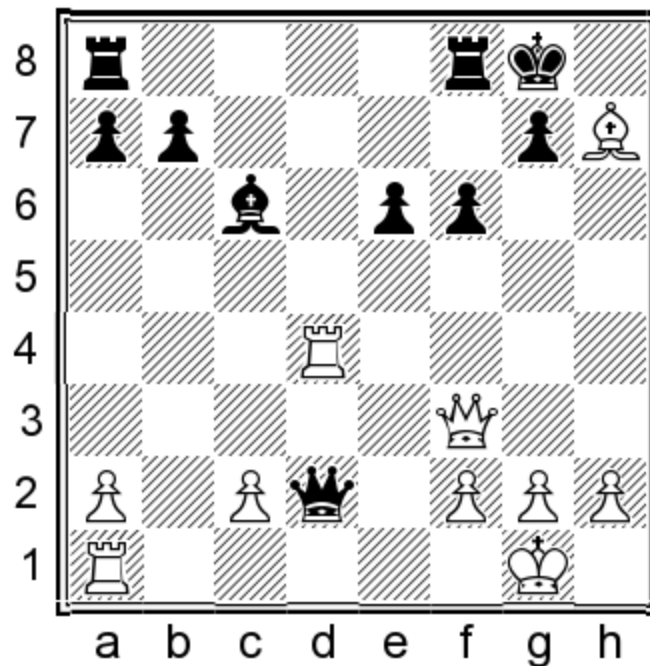
### **18...f6 19.Bd4!**



*Position after: 19.Bd4!*

### **19...Rac8**

The point is that after 19...Bxd4 20.Rxd4 which would be generally desirable for the second player – after all, Black is under attack and would like to exchange the attacking pieces – Black's queen will be in trouble. 20...Bc6 21.Bxh7+!



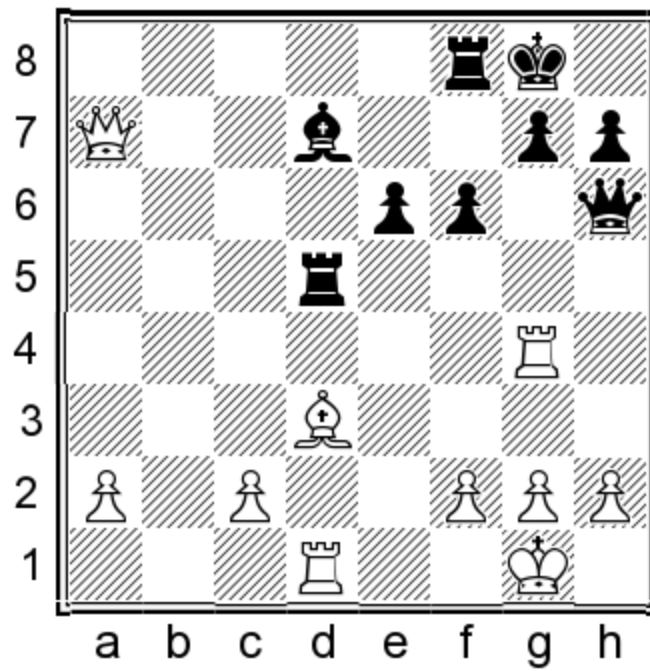
*Position after: 21.Bxh7+!*

21...Kxh7 [21...Kh8 does not help at all due to 22.Qh3! Qxd4 23.Bg6+ Kg8 24.Qh7#] 22.Qh3+ Now that White's queen is not under attack anymore White will capture the opponent's one with either Rxd2 or 22...Qh6 23.Rh4+-.

**20.Rd1 Qh6 21.Bxc5 Rxc5 22.Qxb7**

The dust will soon settle and White will emerge a clear pawn up.

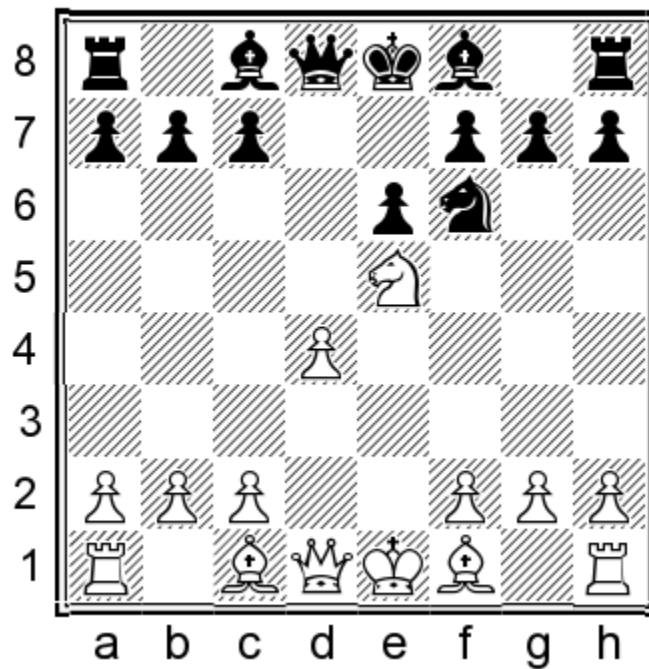
**22...Rd5 23.Qxa7±**



*Position after: 23.Qxa7±*

**b) 5...Ngf6 & 7...--**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nd7 5.Nf3 Ngf6  
6.Nxf6+ Nxf6 7.Ne5**



*Position after: 7.Ne5*

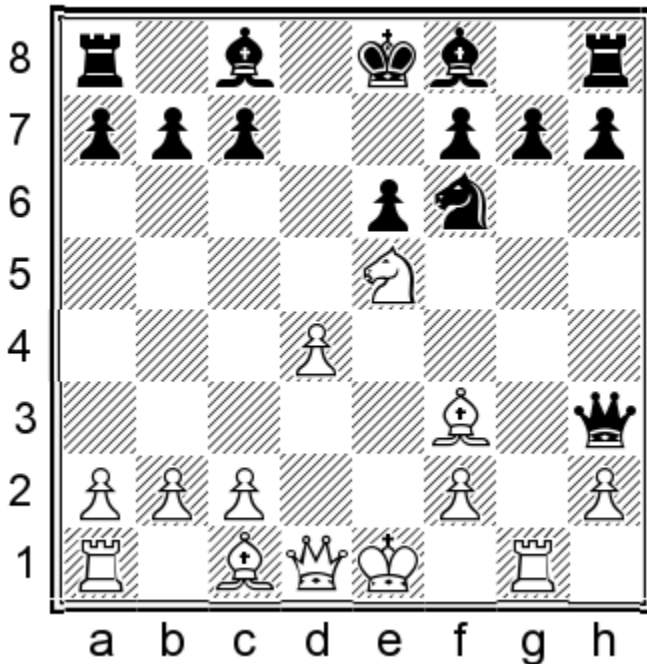
I quite like this move. It was picked up by strong players like Dominguez and Karjakin only recently and is not even mentioned in one of the popular books considering 3...dxe4, *The French Defence Reloaded* by Nikita Vitiugov. Let us examine the options for Black one by one.

### **7...c5**

This is possible but it gives us an easy game with either the bishop pair advantage or the better pawn structure.

**A)** 7...Qd5 is not very impressive. Black claims they are hindering smooth development for White but in fact White can come out all guns blazing with 8.Be2! Qxg2 9.Bf3 Qh3

10.Rg1 when the queen will be in all sorts

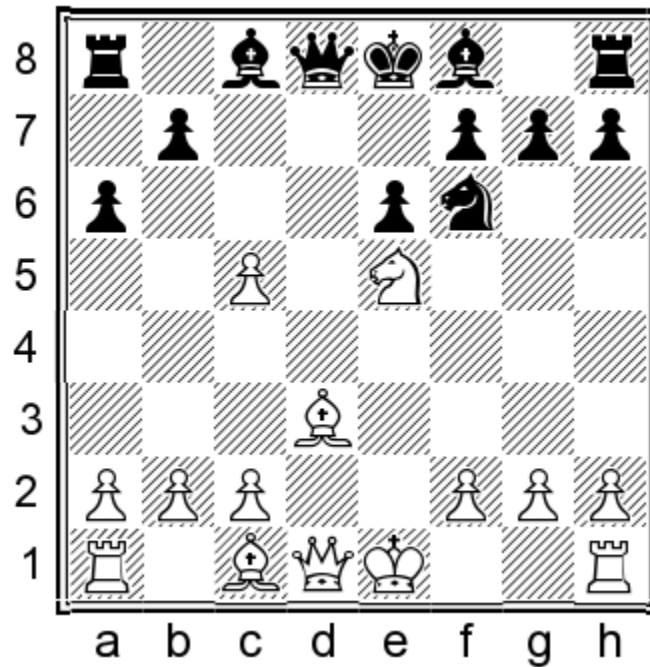


*Position after: 10.Rg1*

of problems on h3. Right now White just wants quick development, e.g. 10...c6 [Note that the greedy 10...Qxh2? never works due to 11.Rh1+–, trapping the queen.]

11.Qe2±, with a quick Bf4 and queenside castling in mind. Black has big problems because they cannot develop their kingside on account of the weakness of the g7-pawn, and they cannot castle queenside because the f7-pawn is attacked by the e5-knight.

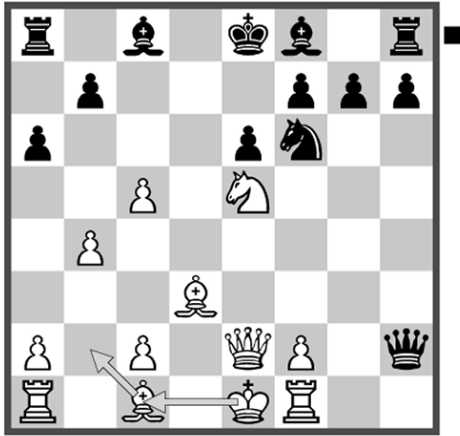
**B)** 7...a6 prepares ...c5 but is not a very useful move altogether. The only chance to muddy the waters for Black is to go for the very concrete line 8.Bd3 c5 9.dxc5



*Position after: 9.dxc5*

**B1)** In the case of 9...Bxc5 10.0-0 0-0 11.Re1 the position can be compared with the one arising after 5...Be7 6.Bd3 Ngf6 7.Nxf6+ Nxf6 8.0-0 0-0 9.Ne5. Black has an extra move ...a6 here but it should not make great difference and White will utilize the same set-up and ideas.

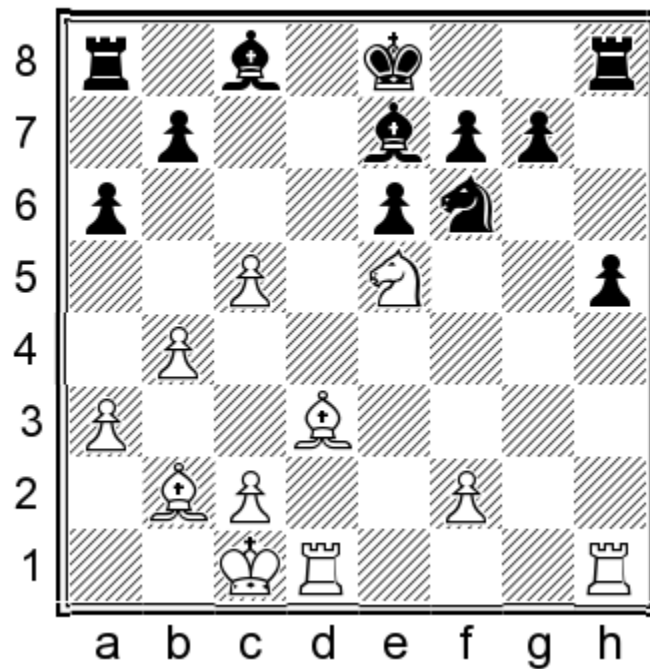
**B2)** 9...Qd5 when some creativity is required from the white side. 10.Qe2! Retreating the knight to f3 is not very appealing. 10...Qxg2 11.Rf1 Qxh2 12.b4



*Position after: 12.b4*

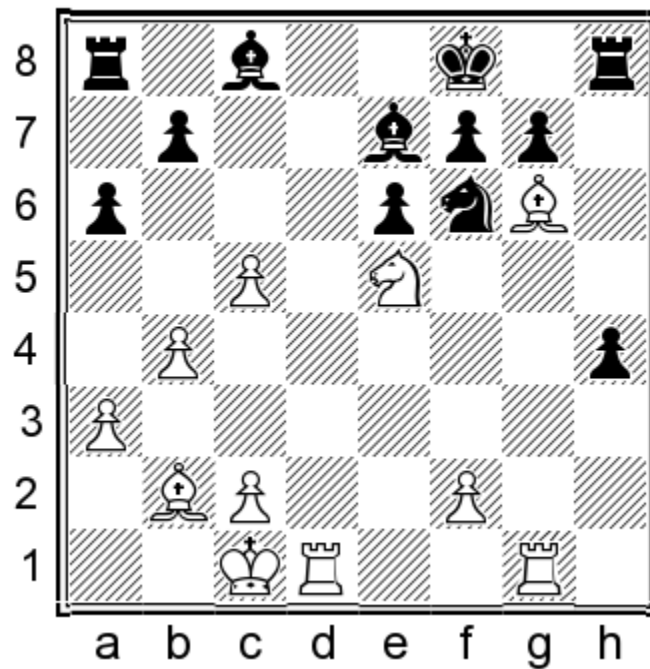
12...Qh5 Black naturally feels threatened as White intends Bb2 and quick queenside castling, therefore they seek to exchange queens. But even in the queenless position White has a very promising initiative in exchange for the sacrificed pawn. Let us have a look on how the game might develop from here. 13.Qxh5 Nxxh5 14.a3 It seems sensible to finish the necessary solidifying work first. 14...Be7 15.Rh1 The rook was not doing much on f1 anyway and White should remove the option of the black knight coming to the f4-square before they play Bb2. 15...Nf6 16.Bb2 h5 17.0-0-0





*Position after: 17.0-0-0*

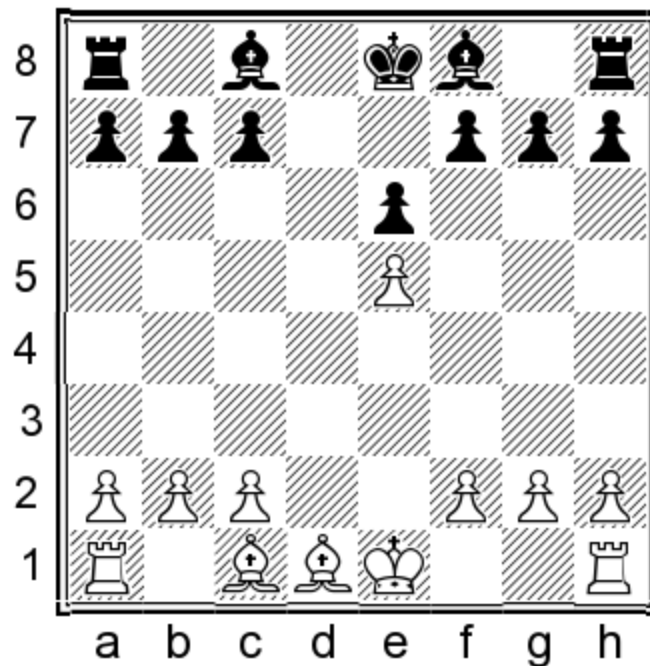
White has finished their development while Black is struggling to do the same. As ...Bd7 is impossible, it seems logical for Black to try to make some use of their extra pawn but 17...h4 already runs into tactical issues. [17...Bd7? loses material immediately 18.Nxd7 Nxd7 19.Bxg7±] 18.Rhg1! Kf8 [18...g6 19.Nc4!, eyeing the b6-square and opening the long diagonal for the b2-bishop, is nasty.] 19.Bg6!±



*Position after: 19.Bg6!±*

The initial position of this ending is one of those cases when the computer evaluates the position as good for Black but after a few moves the assessment tends to slowly change into White's favor. Especially from a practical point of view it is rather difficult to defend Black's position. The point of the bishop invasion is 19...fxg6 20.Nxg6++-, forking half of Black's army and collecting the sacrificed material with interest.

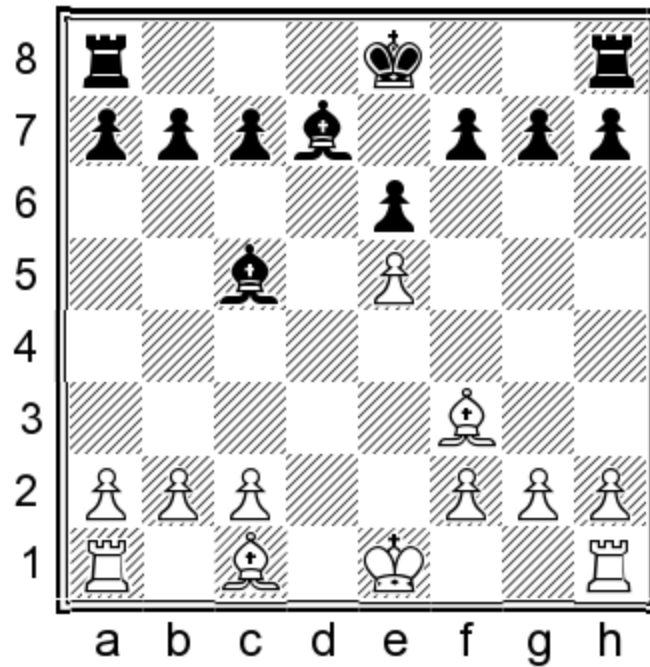
**C)** 7...Nd7 intends to remove the strong knight from e5 but you shouldn't mind playing the better endgame after 8.Be2. I was also trying to make 8.Bf4 work here but was not fully satisfied with the outcome. 8...Nxe5 9.dxe5 Qxd1+ 10.Bxd1



*Position after: 10.Bxd1*

Thanks to the e5-pawn Black's position is rather passive and it will be difficult for the c8-bishop to find a use for itself as well.

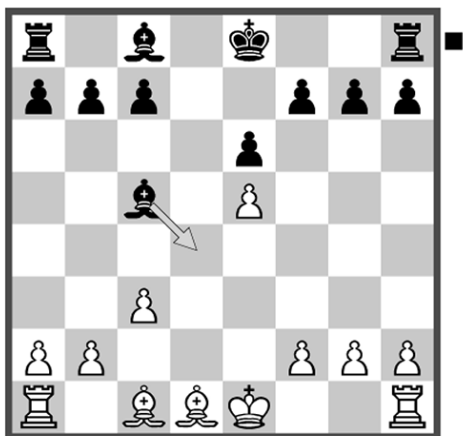
**C1)** 10...Bd7 will be quite similar to the main line. You should remember to play Bf3 immediately after ...Bd7 so that the light-squared bishop cannot establish itself on c6, and to play c3 after ...Bc5 so that the dark-squared bishop cannot reach the d4-square. Then you can grab more space with h4-h5. 11.Bf3! Bc5



*Position after: 11...Bc5*

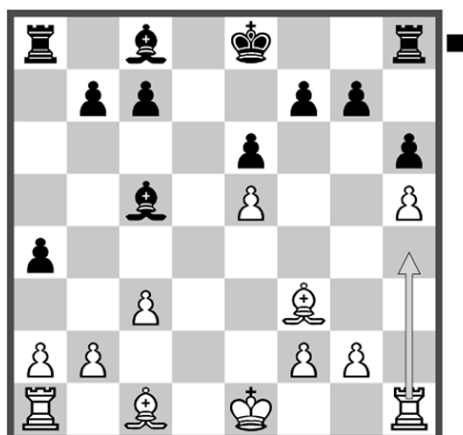
12.c3! [12.Bxb7 Rb8 13.Be4 Bd4 are completely unnecessary complications.] 12...Rb8 13.h4! h6 Playing ...h5 would severely weaken the g5-square, but on the other hand White's pawn needs to be stopped at some point. 14.h5 Black's bishops are under control and White can continue with Rh4, possibly probing Black's position with Rg4/Rc4.

**C2)** 10...Bc5 11.c3!



*Position after: 11.c3!*

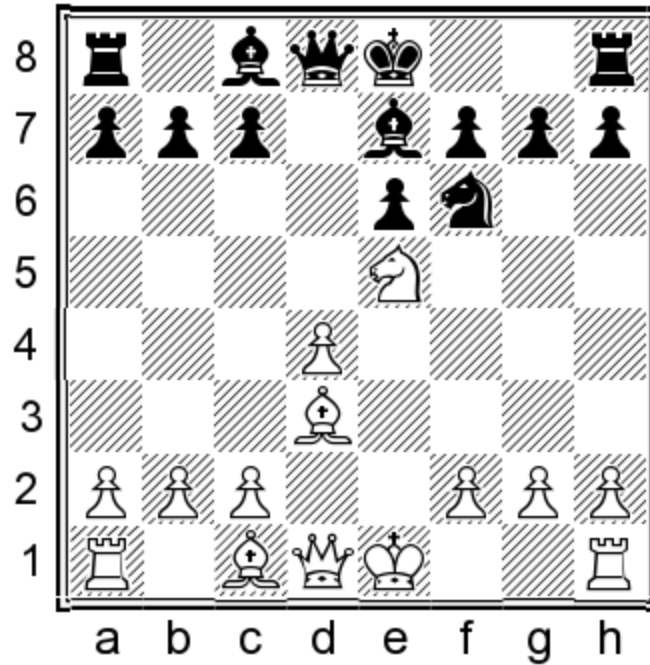
It would be even better if we could magically insert Be3 before ...Bc5 so that the dark-squared bishop would have no squares at all, but here we at least stop it from coming to d4. However, the development of the c8-bishop will be an even greater problem for Black. 11...a5 Black is trying to gain some space on the queenside but we just use our universal set-up of Bf3, h4-h5 and Rh4. [11...Bd7 12.Bf3! stops ...Bc6 as if 12...Bc6 then 13.Bxc6+ bxc6 is rather bad for Black.] 12.Bf3 a4 13.h4 h6 14.h5<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 14.h5<sup>2</sup>*

with an unpleasant position for Black. White's rook will be very strong on h4, being able to quickly switch focus from one side to another with Rg4/c4.

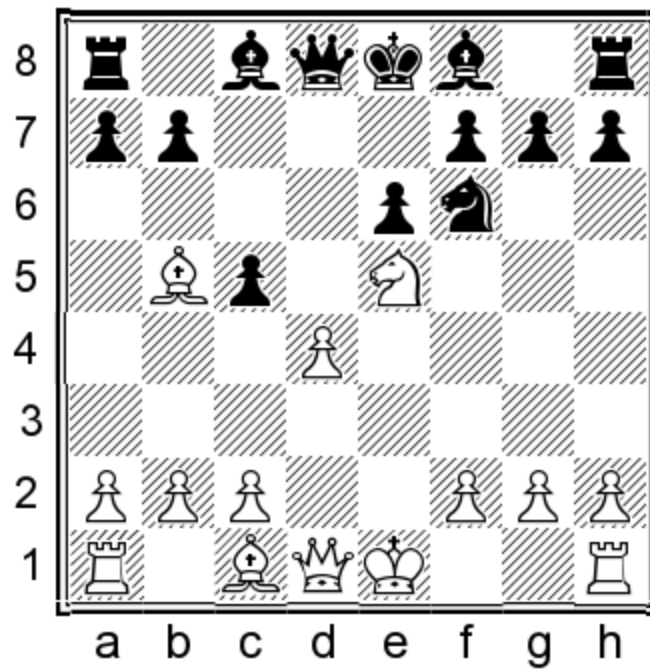
**D) 7...Be7 8.Bd3**



*Position after: 8.Bd3*

This will transpose into the 5...Be7 lines as Black will play ...c5 at some point. The d4-pawn is always taboo due to discovered attacks, e.g. 8...0-0 [8...Qxd4 9.Bb5+!] 9.0-0 c5 10.dxc5.

**8.Bb5+**

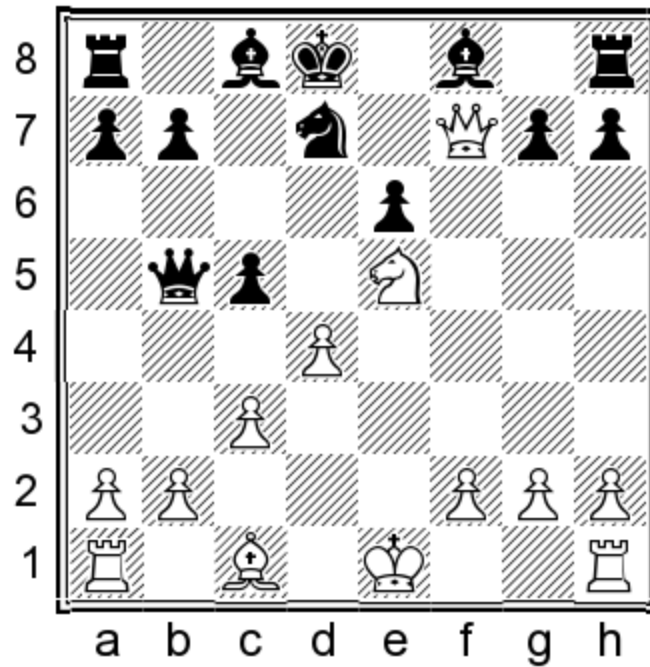


*Position after: 8.Bb5+*

### **8...Bd7**

8...Nd7? tries to keep the bishop pair but to no avail. 9.Qf3! is simply horrible for Black. They would be terribly stuck even if White were to calmly castle, but this is the most precise move.

**A)** 9...Qa5+ 10.c3 Qxb5 11.Qxf7+ Kd8

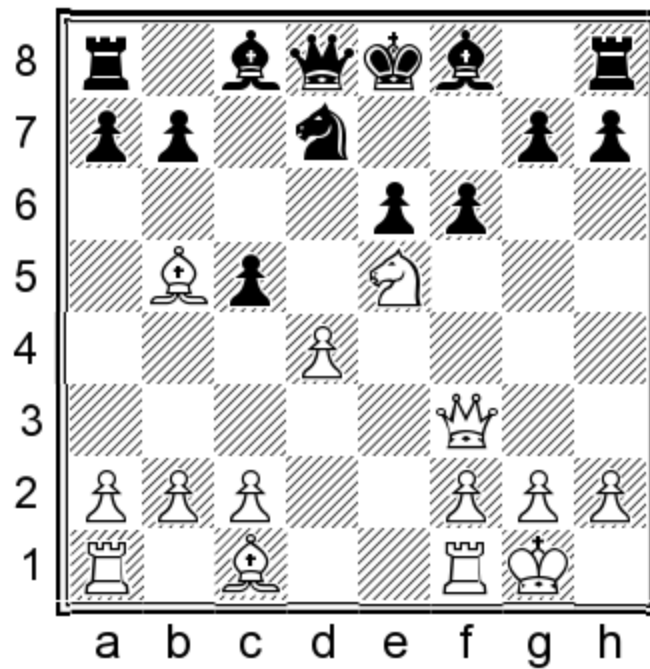


*Position after: 11...Kd8*

wins a piece for Black but lands them in a rather unfavorable situation after 12.Bg5+ Kc7 13.a4 Qxb2 14.0-0+- when Black will be crushed, most likely with Bf4 or Rab1, as their extra piece has no significance in such a position.

**B)** 9...f6 10.0-0!

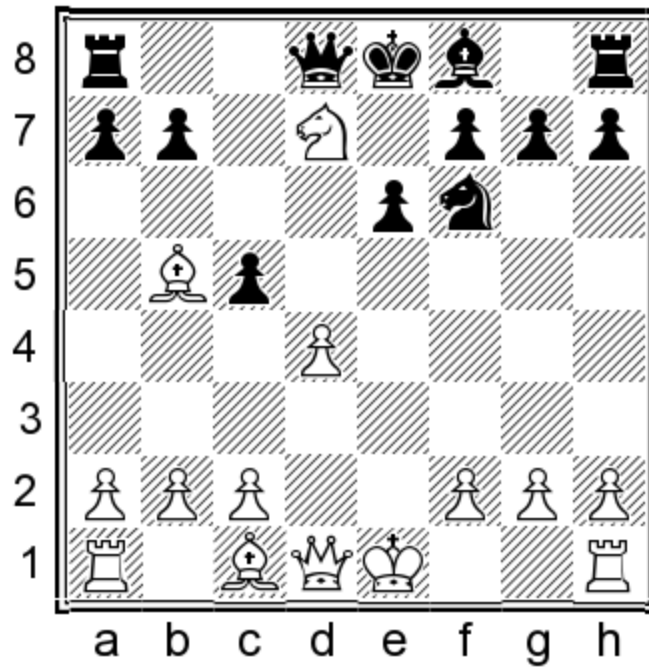




*Position after: 10.0-0!*

White has pretty nice tactics here 10...fxe5 11.Qh5+ g6 [11...Ke7 12.Bg5+ Nf6 13.dxe5+- simply regains the piece with a great edge.] 12.Qxe5 The queen is taboo because the d7-knight is pinned! 12...Rg8 13.Qxe6+- and White captures the g8-rook.

**9.Nxd7**



*Position after: 9.Nxd7*

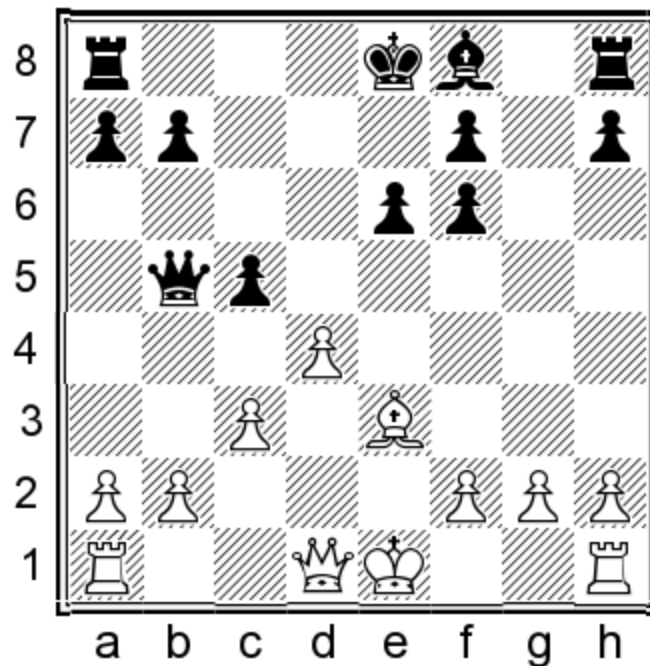
### **9...Qa5+**

9...Nxd7 poses White no problems whatsoever. 10.0-0 a6 11.Be2 Bd6 12.dxc5 Nxc5 13.g3!<sup>2</sup> Nipping all funky ideas around the h2-square weakness in the bud and preparing squares for White's bishops. They will exert a lot of pressure from f3 and e3 and White has a slight advantage with not much risk here.

### **10.c3 Qxb5 11.Nxf6+ gxf6**

Black's pawn structure is clearly inferior and White continues to play simply with...

### **12.Be3!**



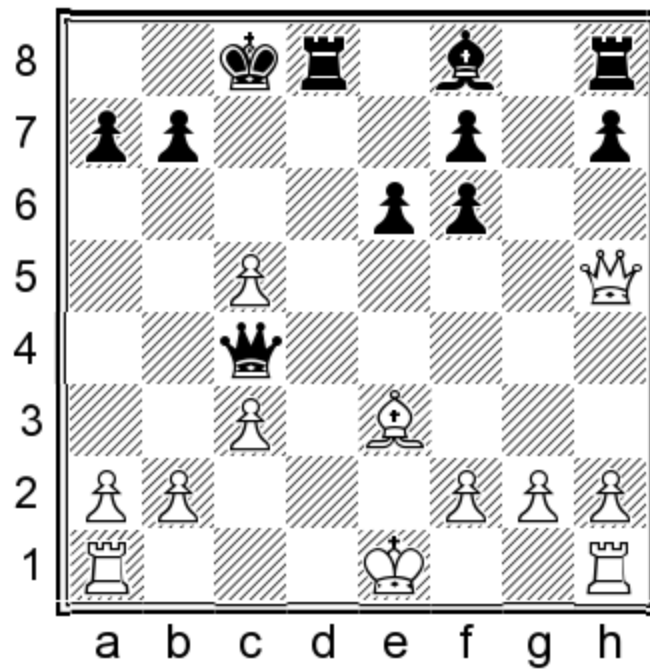
*Position after: 12.Be3!*

The b2-pawn is hanging but with their queen being the only developed piece it would be quite daring for Black to accept the sacrifice.

## **12...Rg8**

Trying to create some weaknesses on the h1-a8 diagonal, though in principle White's reaction remains the same. We cover the g2-pawn, then first push Black's queen away with Qh5 and only then play Qe2.

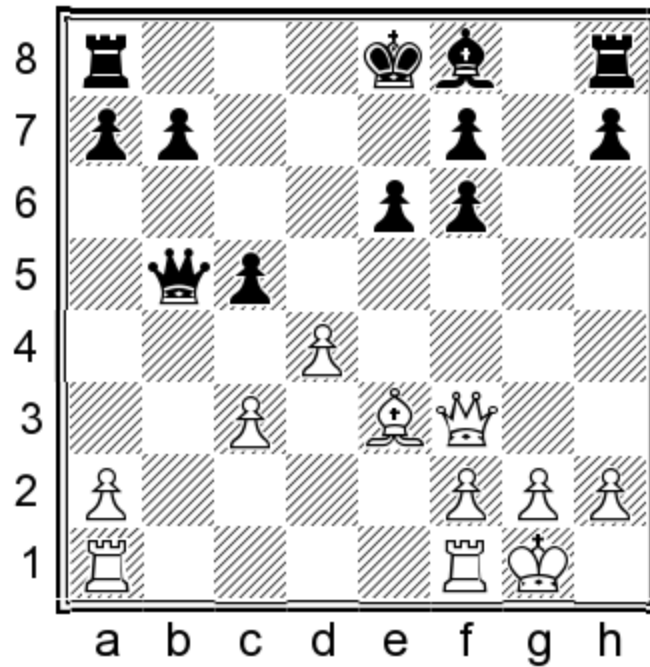
**A)** 12...0-0-0 13.Qh5 [Especially here the move 13.Qe2 could prove to be an imprecision as after 13...Qc6 14.0-0 Black can play 14...h5, gaining some space on the kingside.] 13...Qc4 [13...Qxb2 14.0-0 is even worse than 12...Qxb2 as White's queen is very strong on h5, harassing the f7-pawn.] 14.dxc5!



*Position after: 14.dxc5!*

This should be compared with the position with ...Rg8 and g3 included. After 14...f5 15.Qxf7 Bxc5 16.Bxc5 Qe4+ 17.Be3+- there is no rook hanging on h1.

**B)** 12...Qxb2 13.0-0 Qb5 14.Qf3



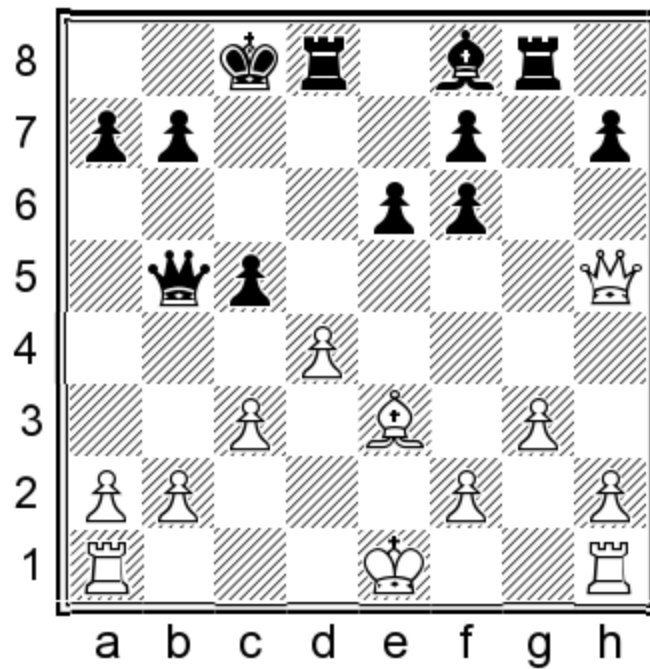
*Position after: 14.Qf3*

is very unpleasant, e.g. 14...Be7 15.Rfb1 Qc6 16.Rxb7 Qxf3 17.gxf3 cxd4 18.cxd4± and after White's other rook comes to the 7th rank as well it will be time for Black to resign.

### **13.g3 0-0-0 14.Qh5!?**

Luring Black's queen to the c4-square.

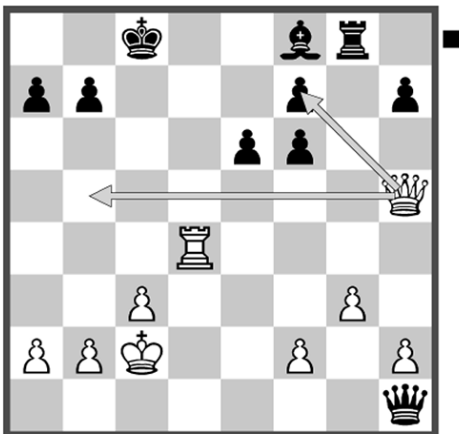
It is possible to play 14.Qe2 immediately but it'd be nice to have the option of long castling after 14...Qc6 as 15.0-0-0? does not work here due to 15...cxd4 16.Bxd4 Rxd4! 17.Rxd4 Qxh1+-+.



*Position after: 14.Qh5!?*

### 14...Qc4

14...Qc6 is a bit more tricky here. White keeps an advantage by castling kingside but, in comparison with the position with the white queen on e2, here 15.0-0-0! works too. The point is that after 15...cxd4 16.Bxd4 Rxd4 17.Rxd4 Qxh1+ 18.Kc2! Black is unable to stop White's queen from penetrating their defenses with Qxf7 or

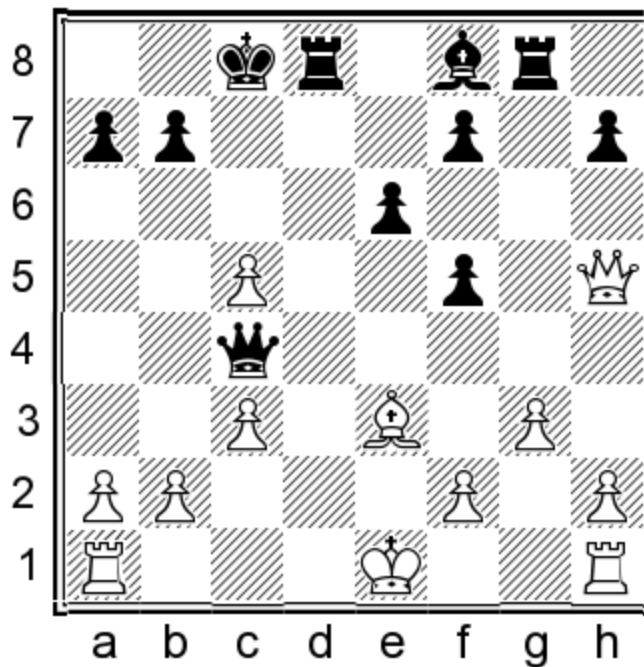


*Position after: 18.Kc2!*

Qb5-e8 and at the same time the h1-queen is unable to generate any threats on its own. 18...Rg7 [18...Qc6 loses to 19.Qxf7 Rh8 20.Qxf6+- and Black cannot stop both Qxh8 and Qd8#.] 19.Qb5! and since Qe8+ is a killer Black needs to part with their queen by playing 19...Qc6 20.Rc4+-.

## 15.Qe2

15.dxc5 f5 This is a bit messy because of the weakening



move g3:

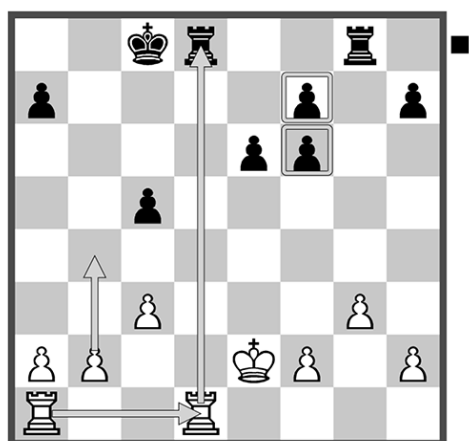
*Position after: 15...f5*

16.Qxf7? Bxc5 17.Bxc5 Qe4+!-+ Therefore we need to opt for a more restrained option than without the inclusion of ...Rg8 and g3.

## 15...Qxe2+

The queen would be a bit uncomfortable on d5 after 15...Qd5 16.0-0 as White would be able to gain a useful tempo with Rad1 later on.

**16.Kxe2 b6 17.dxc5 Bxc5 18.Bxc5 bxc5 19.Rhd1<sup>2</sup>**



*Position after: 19.Rhd1<sup>2</sup>*

White has a pleasant advantage even in this endgame. Their dream scenario is to exchange all the rooks and simplify into a pawn ending where they would be clearly winning because of Black's damaged structure on the kingside. White can create a passed pawn on the queenside in such an endgame quite easily while it is very difficult for Black to advance their doubled pawns on the kingside.

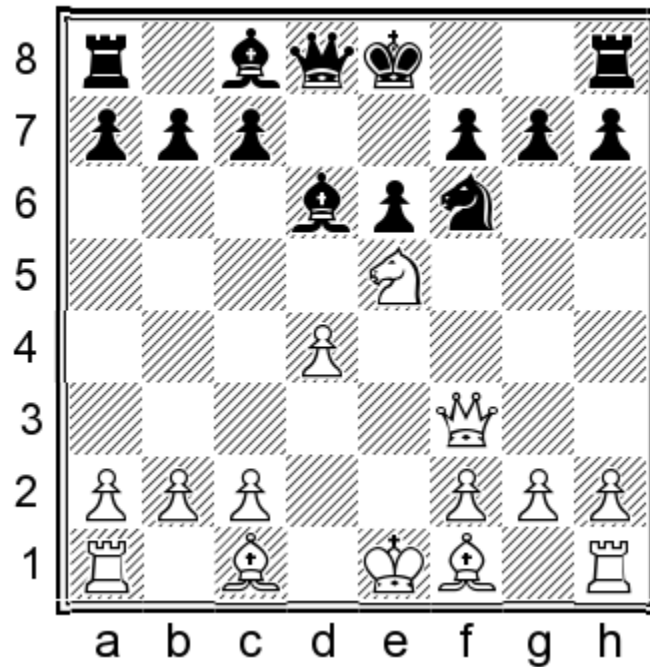
**c) 5...Ngf6 & 7...Bd6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nd7 5.Nf3 Ngf6 6.Nxf6+ Nxf6 7.Ne5 Bd6**

Challenging the e5-knight with a developing move is the most principled try.



## 8.Qf3!?

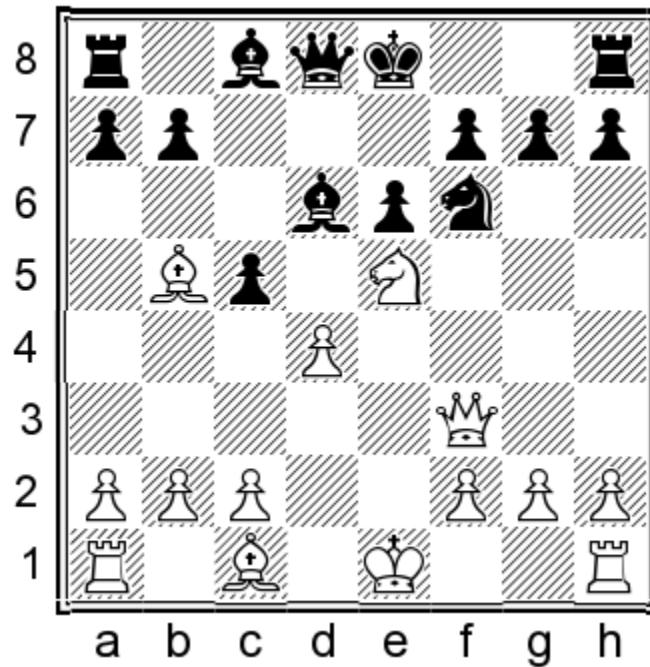


*Position after: 8.Qf3!?*

This move was reintroduced into modern chess by GM Dominguez in a speed chess event. A little journey into chess history shows that this move was first employed by his more illustrious countryman and the 3rd World Champion Capablanca against Blanco Estera in 1913 (yes, more than 100 years ago!). This game has also been annotated by Jose Raul himself in his famous book "Chess Fundamentals".

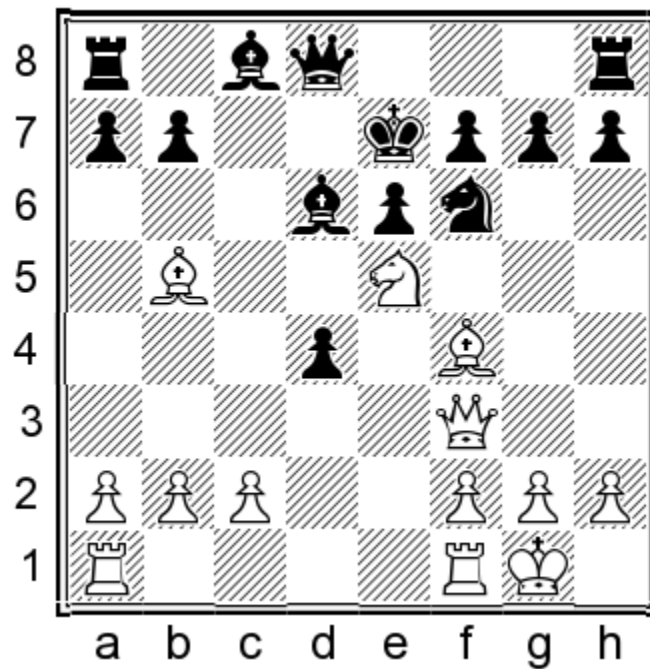
## 8...0-0

**A)** The most consistent reply is 8...c5, immediately undermining the e5-knight. However, Black's king will be stuck in the center after 9.Bb5+



*Position after: 9.Bb5+*

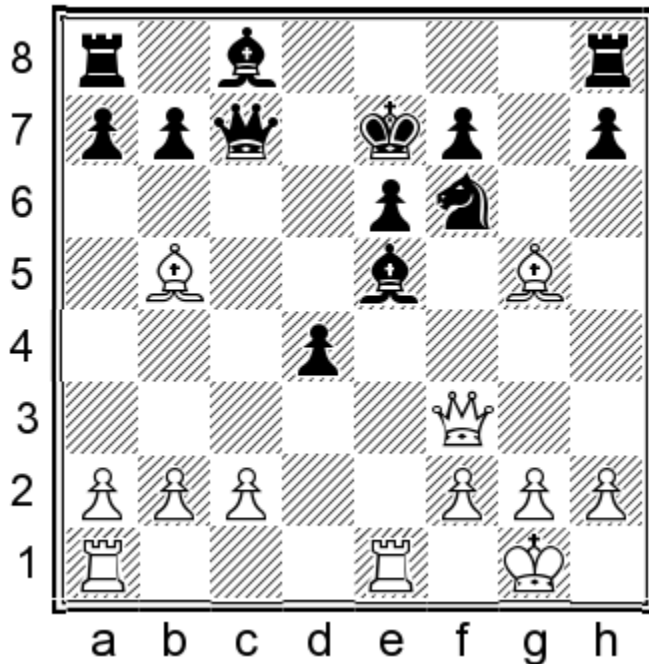
9...Ke7 [9...Bd7? is impossible due to 10.Bxd7+ Nxd7 11.Qxf7#.] and now White can afford to alter their plans with 10.O-O cxd4 11.Bf4. The d4-pawn is very weak and will be eventually captured, while it will take quite some time for Black to solve the matter of their king's safety.



*Position after: 11.Bf4*

**A1)** 11...g5? 12.Bxg5! Excessive violence rarely brings good results with one's king stuck in the middle.  
 12...Bxe5 13.Rfe1 [13.Rae1 is equally good.] Black needs

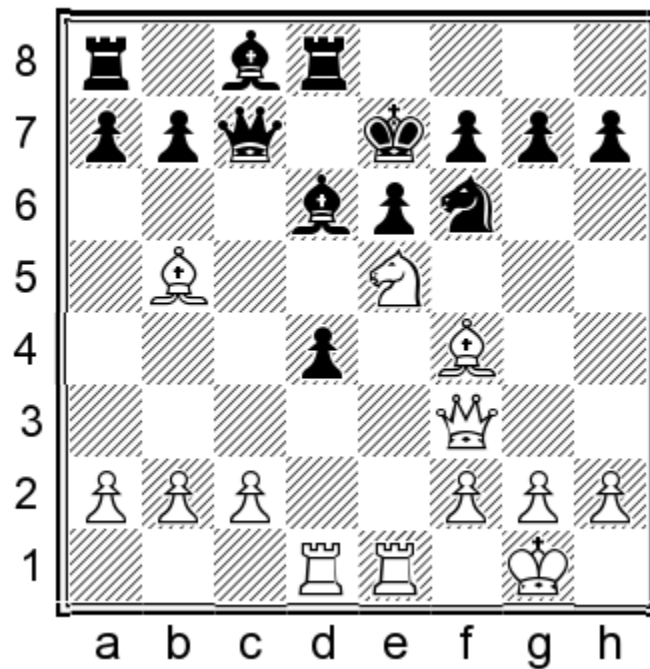
to defend the f6-knight indirectly with 13...Qc7,



*Position after: 13...Qc7*

which, unfortunately for the second player, leads to a forced mate anyway. 14.Rxe5! Qxe5 15.Bxf6+ Qxf6 16.Qa3+ Kd8 17.Qd6+ Bd7 18.Qxd7#

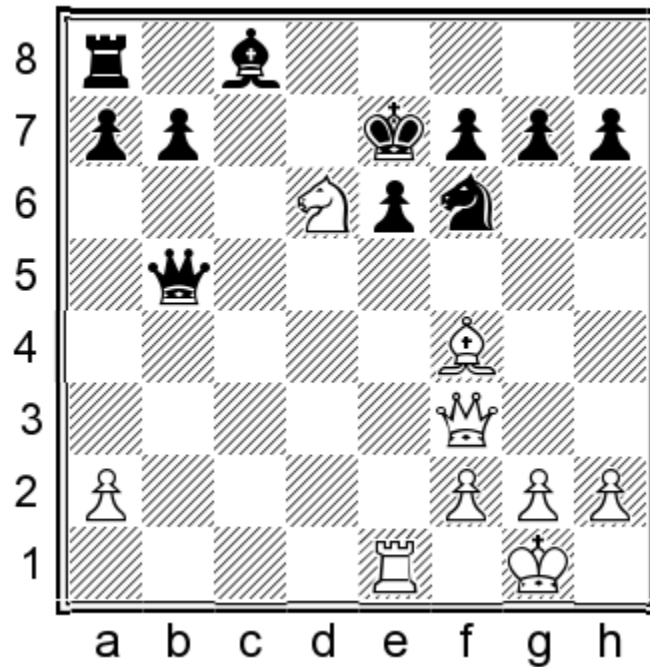
**A2)** 11...Qc7 12.Rfe1 [Once again, 12.Rae1 is equally good.] 12...Rd8 [12...g5? is the same violent variation Black could have started on move 11 and after 13.Bxg5 Bxe5 14.Rxe5!+- Black will be ruthlessly checkmated as noted previously.] 13.Rad1<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 13.Rad1<sup>2</sup>*

White will simply recapture on d4 and stand better.

**A2.1)** 13...Qxc2 14.Rxd4 is too optimistic for Black and objectively lost too. White has tremendous compensation and they just blast through, e.g. 14...Qxb2 15.Rxd6! Rxd6 16.Nc4 Qxb5 17.Nxd6



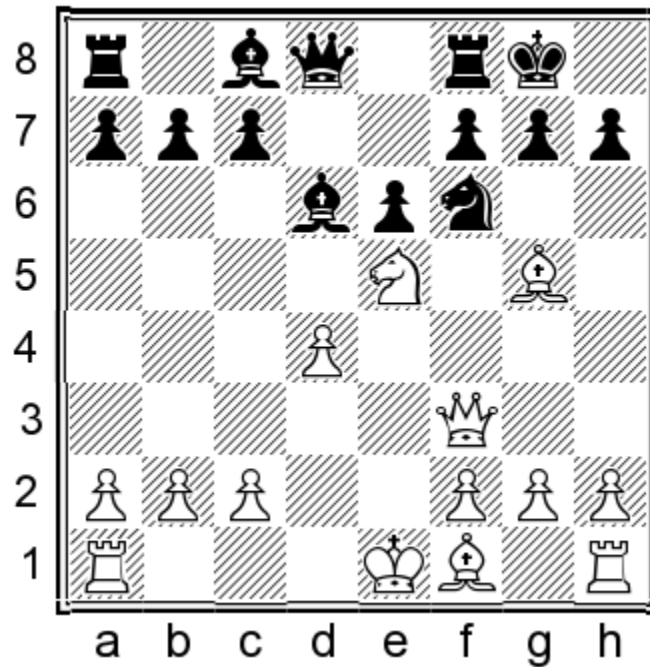
*Position after: 17.Nxd6*

and it is no surprise that Black succumbs to the white attack, as their queenside is still asleep. 17...Qb6 18.Nf5+ Kf8 19.Qa3+ Kg8 20.Nh6+!! gxh6 21.Bxh6+- with a dark-squared massacre.

**A2.2)** Black cannot really defend the pawn with 13...Qc5 14.Bf1 Kf8 because White can just open the position anyway with 15.c3! since 15...dxc3? 16.Nc4+- leaves Black with unsolvable problems on the d-file.

**B)** As already mentioned before, the first game in the variation was played by Capablanca, where 8...c6?! was played by his opponent. 9.c3 0-0 10.Bg5 Be7 11.Bd3 Ne8 12.Qh3 f5 13.Bxe7 Qxe7± Capablanca - Blanco Estera, Havana 1913

## 9.Bg5

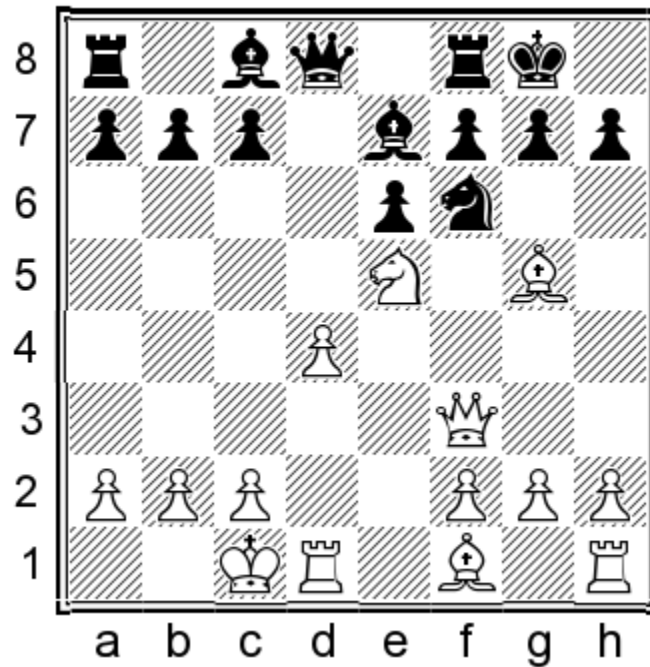


*Position after: 9.Bg5*

### **9...Be7**

Opening the position with 9...c5 is in White's favor as they are the one with greater mobility and spatial advantage. 10.0-0-0 cxd4 11.Rxd4 Qa5 12.Rxd6 Qxe5 13.Bf4<sup>2</sup> With the c8-bishop stuck there is no doubt White's better. Their position will be superior even in endgames thanks to the bishop pair.

### **10.0-0-0**



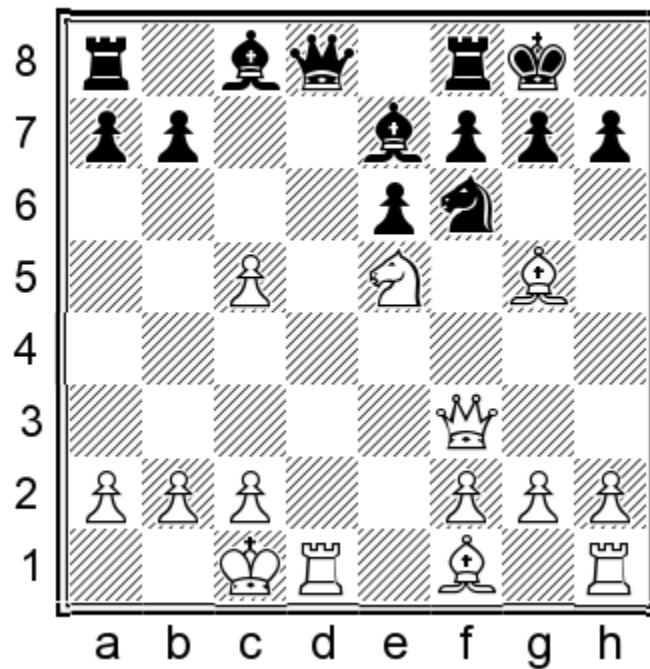
*Position after: 10.0-0-0*

### **10...Qd5**

Because of the undefended a2-pawn, Black is able to force a worse endgame, but once again we should be very happy to accept such a course of events.

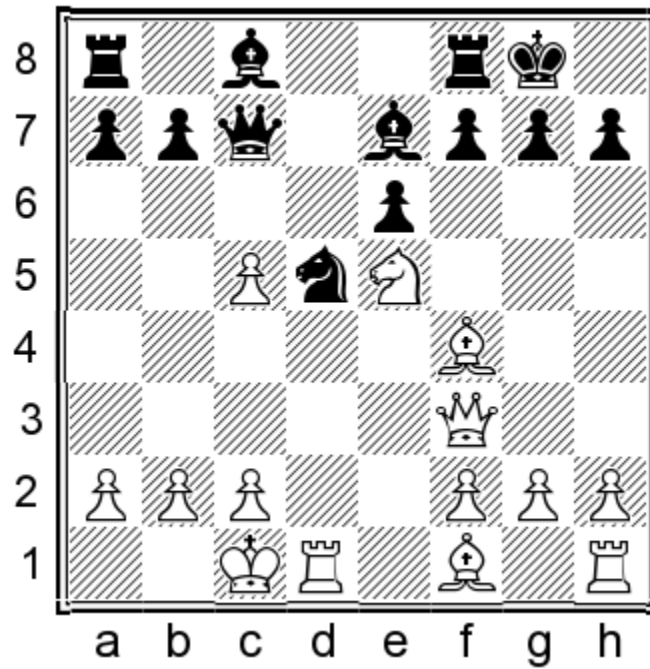
10...c5 does not promise anything for Black either because White has the strong 11.dxc5.





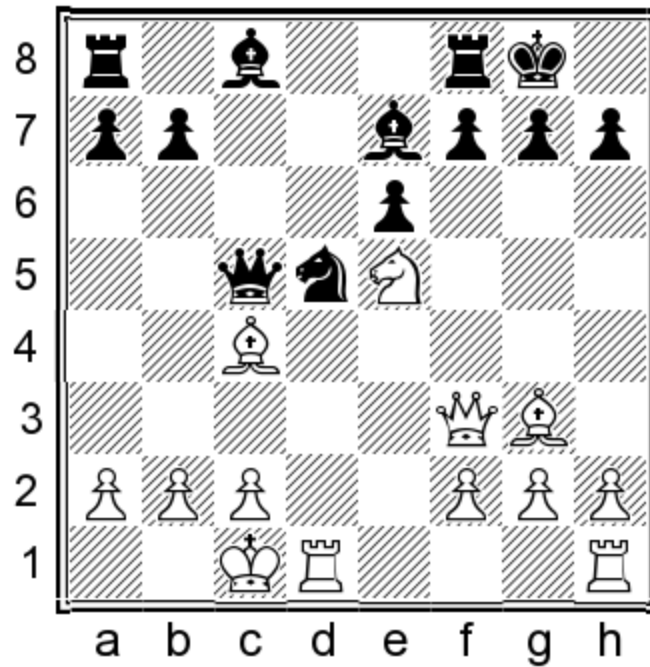
*Position after: 11.dxc5*

**A)** 11...Qc7 12.Bf4 If Black simply captures on c5 then White has the simple plan of Bc4, Rhe1 when it is difficult for Black to develop the rest of their queenside. 12...Nd5



*Position after: 12...Nd5*

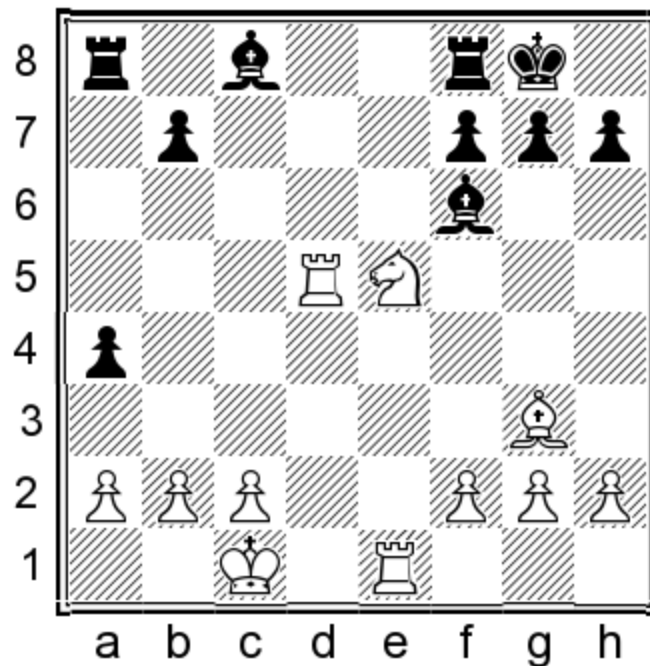
13.Bg3 [13.Rxd5? is tempting but fails epically after  
 13...exd5 14.Ng6 Bg5!!-+ and suddenly Black is winning.]  
 13...Qxc5 14.Bc4



*Position after: 14.Bc4*

Even here the d5-knight will not be able to hold its position for long. White will simply exchange it and pocket the pawn.

**A1)** 14...Bf6 15.Bb3 There is no obligation to capture on d5 immediately, therefore White makes some preparatory moves. If the d5-knight moves away then the problem of developing the c8-bishop resurfaces. 15...a5 16.Rhe1 a4 17.Bxd5 exd5 18.Qxd5 Qxd5 19.Rxd5<sup>2</sup>

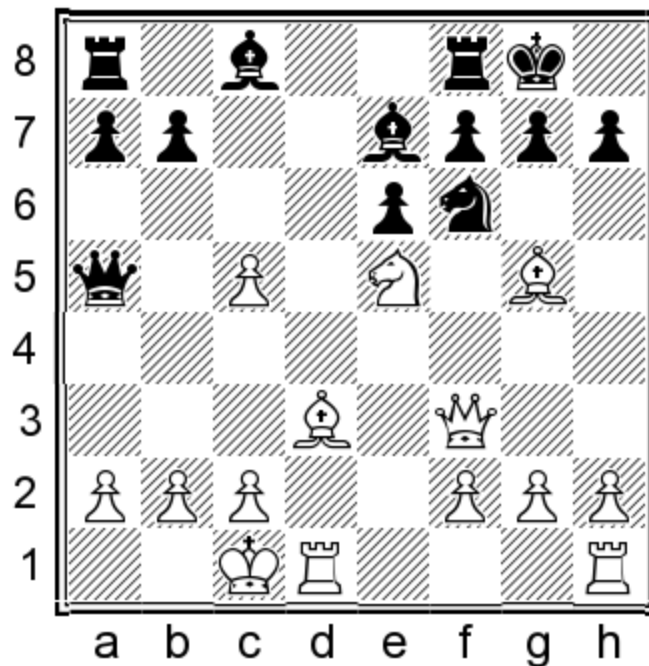


*Position after: 19.Rxd5<sup>2</sup>*

Black might have some small compensation for the pawn in the form of the bishop pair but they face an uphill battle.

**A2)** 14...b5 15.Bxd5 exd5 16.Rxd5<sup>2</sup> with a healthy extra pawn.

**B)** 11...Qa5 12.Bd3!, [Black's idea is to make White lose a tempo with 12.Kb1 so that after 12...Qxc5 the e5-knight is hanging and there is no Rhe1 to cover it. However, White has some tricks up their own sleeve.]



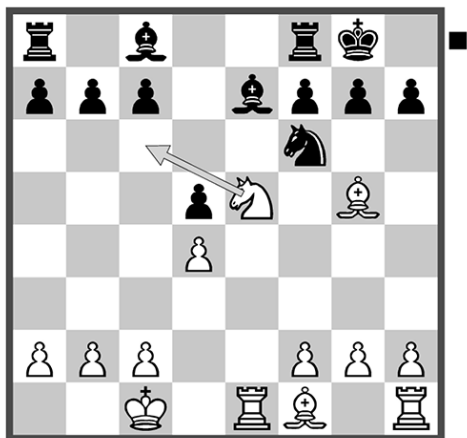
*Position after: 12.Bd3!,*

12...Qxa2 [Now after 12...Qxc5 White has the natural 13.Rhe1 and all their pieces are on great squares.] 13.c3! ± It is important to stop ...Qa1+ (White has either Kc2 or Bb1 available), and now White will have all the fun after Qh3, targeting the weak points on Black's kingside. Black cannot do any real damage on the other side of the board with only one piece in the attack.

### **11.Qxd5 exd5**

11...Nxd5 12.Bxe7 Nxe7 13.g3<sup>2</sup> is also advantageous for White. The difference in light-squared bishops' activity is significant.

### **12.Re1!**



*Position after: 12.Re1!*

A very important maneuver. The immediate threat is Nc6, damaging Black's pawn structure and grabbing the bishop pair advantage at the same time.

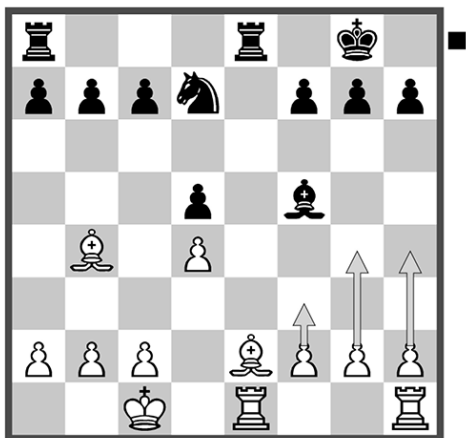
**12...Be6**

This actually doesn't stop White stealing the bishop pair due to another clever trick.

**13.Nd7! Nxd7 14.Bxe7**

Finally White has claimed something tangible.

**14...Rfe8 15.Bb4 Bf5 16.Be2<sup>2</sup>**



*Position after: 16.Be2*

White definitely has the better chances here. The bishop pair will make themselves felt after White starts pushing the pawns on the kingside, gradually grabbing more and more space.

## **Part IV**

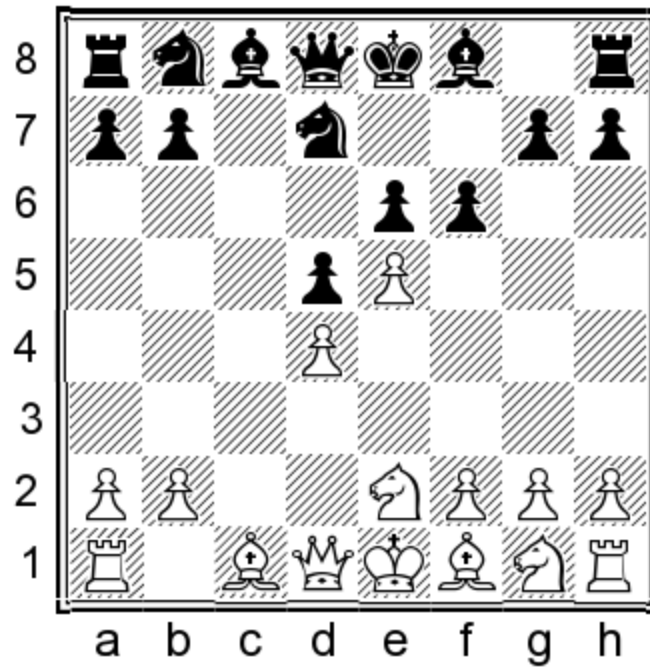
**3...Nf6 4.e5 & 5.Nce2**



# Chapter 6

## The early ...f6 break

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3  
cxd4 7.cxd4 f6**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 6 - The early ...f6 break

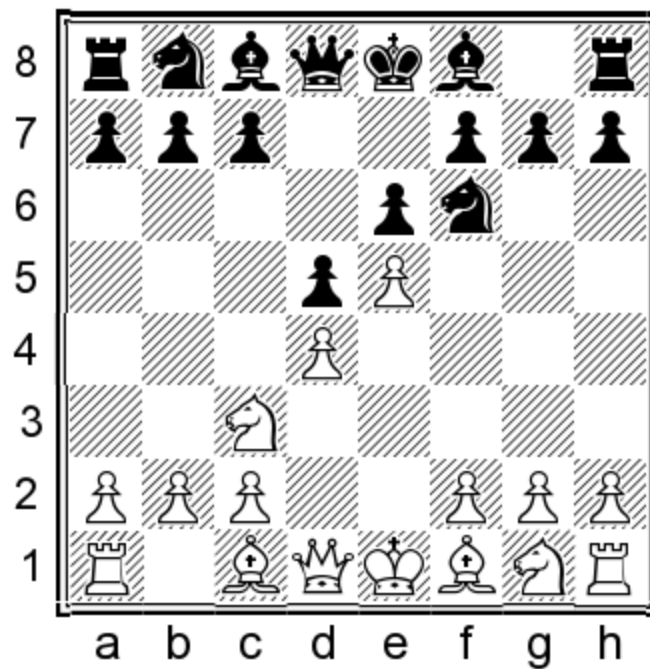
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 cxd4  
7.cxd4 f6 8.f4 fxe5 9.fxe5 Bb4+ 10.Bd2 Qh4+ 11.g3

a) 11...Qe4?

b) 11...Bxd2+

**a) 11...Qe4?**

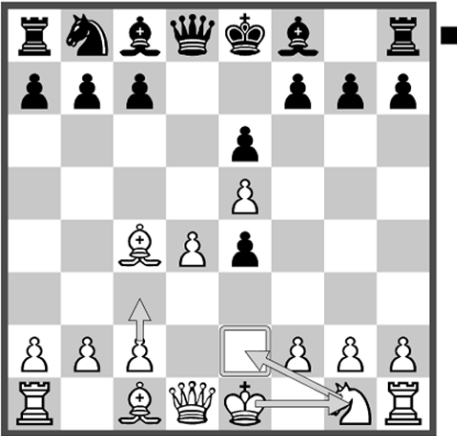
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5**



*Position after: 4.e5*

**4...Nfd7**

4...Ne4 is dubious as long as White remembers to counter it with 5.Nxe4 dxe4 6.Bc4<sup>2</sup>.

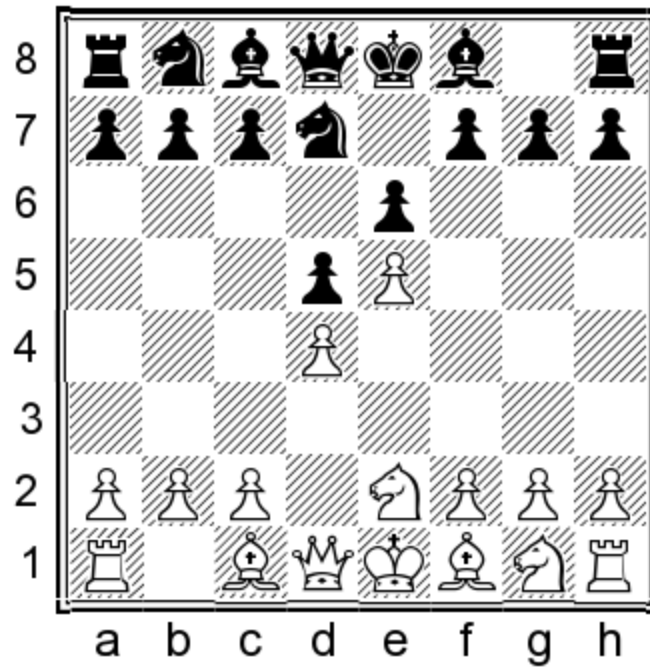


*Position after: 6.Bc4<sup>2</sup>*

Because of Black's damaged pawn structure White is happy to calmly develop their kingside with Ne2 and target the obvious weakness on e4 later on. At the same time they are well prepared to stop attempts to muddy the waters with **A)** 6...a6 7.a4! keeps a firm grip. [Just be sure not to fall for an embarrassing trick like 7.Ne2 b5 8.Bb3 c5 9.d5?? c4-+.]

**B)** 6...c5 which will be met by 7.d5! Thanks to their superior development White is clearly better prepared to open the position compared to their opponent.

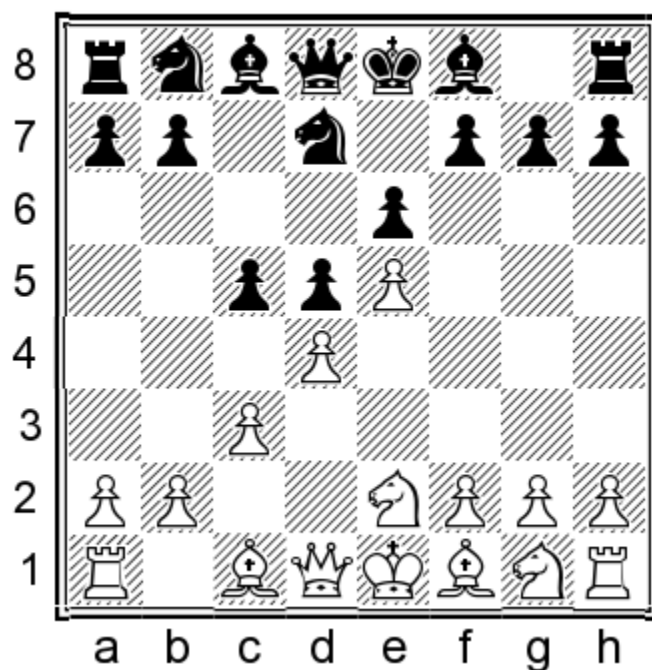
**5.Nce2**



*Position after: 5.Nce2*

5.f4 is of course the main move, however we have chosen a different set-up as a 'warm-up' before the next part of the book. Our aim is to overprotect the vulnerable d4-square (in the spirit of Aaron Nimzowitsch), limiting Black's hopes of undermining the center with ...f6. As moving the f7-pawn seriously weakens e6, we also keep the option of attacking it with a knight from f4 up our sleeve.

**5...c5 6.c3**



*Position after: 6.c3*

We will deal with all of Black's possible set-ups in the following chapters, starting with the most forcing variations and gradually working towards the most natural (and also the most resilient!) set-ups with ...Nc6, ...Be7, and ...0-0.

### **6...cxd4**

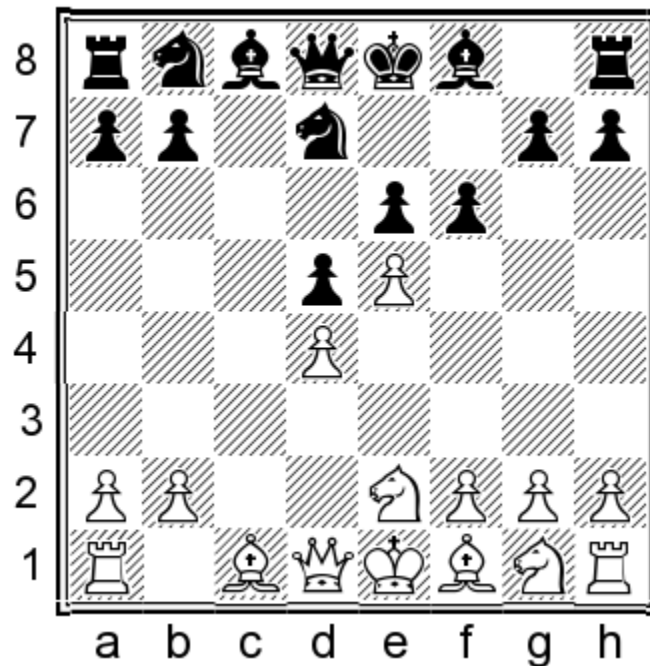
The first chance to steer the game towards complications, and a move played by several grandmasters. We should be ready for some very concrete chess right from the very beginning in this line.

**A)** 6...Nc6 will be dealt with in the following chapters.

**B)** Similarly, 6...b5 7.Nf3 Nc6 is considered via the move order 6...Nc6 7.Nf3 b5.

**C)** Finally, note that 6...f6? 7.Nf4 is quite different from the note on White's 8th move discussed in the text line. As a matter of fact Black is already much worse here, as 7...Qb6 8.Qh5+ forces them to play the extremely awkward move 8...Ke7.

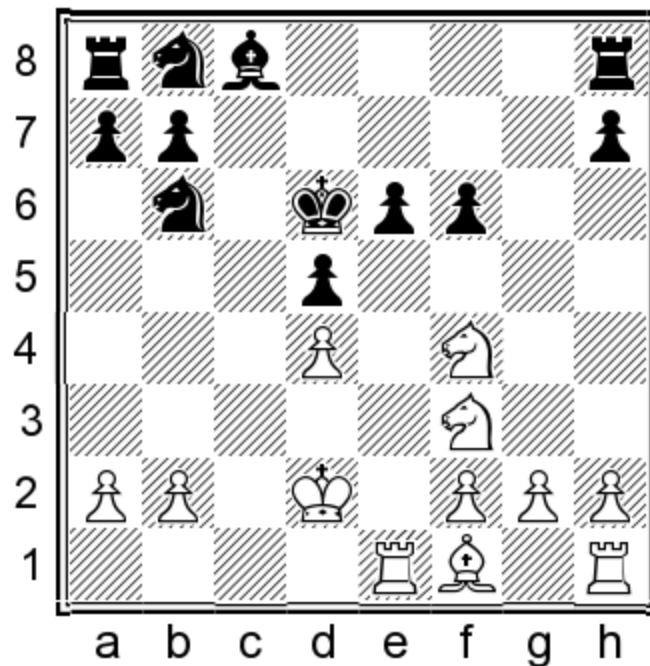
## 7.cxd4 f6



*Position after: 7...f6*

## 8.f4

**A)** 8.Nf4 Bb4+ 9.Bd2 Qb6 10.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 11.Qd2 Qxd2+ 12.Kxd2 Ke7 13.exf6+ gxf6 14.Re1 Nb6 15.Nf3 Kd6



*Position after: 15...Kd6*

At first this looks quite nice for White. However, Black quickly gets in ...e5, and builds up a strong center. I actually think that if anyone stands better, then it is probably Black.

**B)** 8.exf6 Leads nowhere. 8...Nxf6 9.Nf3 Nc6 10.Nc3 Bd6 11.Bb5 0-0 12.0-0 Ng4 13.h3 Rxf3 14.Qxf3 Nh2∞

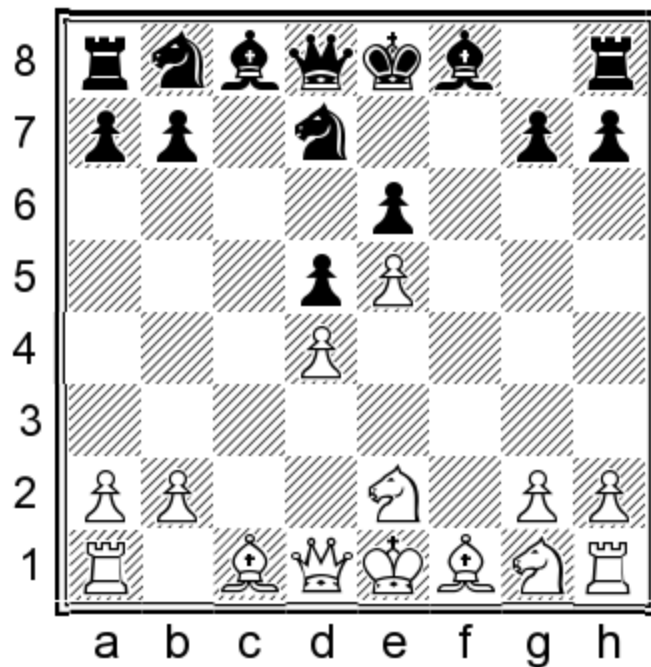
### **8...fxe5**

This is the main reason why White does not go f4 in practice. But in fact if we dig a bit deeper, things are far from easy for Black.

8...Bb4+ 9.Bd2 The dark-squared bishop is one of Black's most prospective pieces and exchanging it so easily is too cooperative to give Black full equality. 9...Qb6 10.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 11.Qd2 Qxd2+ 12.Kxd2 Nc6 13.Nf3<sup>2</sup> With a stable

center, a spatial advantage, and Black's remaining bishop stuck on c8 White has a very pleasant edge.

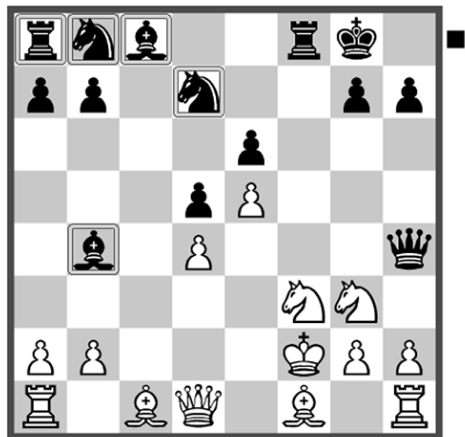
**9.fxe5**



*Position after: 9.fxe5*

**9...Bb4+**

9...Qh4+ 10.Ng3 Bb4+ 11.Kf2 0-0+ 12.Nf3

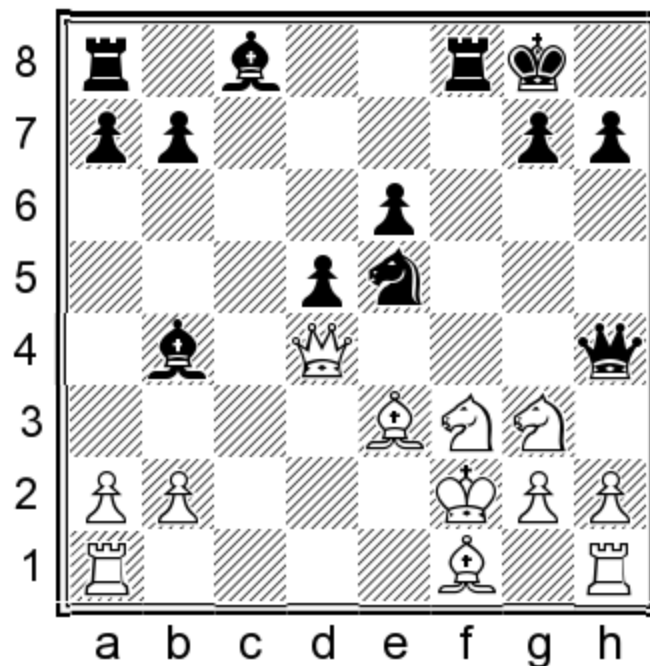




*Position after: 12.Nf3*

This looks a little dodgy at first sight, but Black's pieces don't have enough power to inflict any real damage to White's monarch. There is not much Black can do with five pieces offside. 12...Nc6 13.Be3

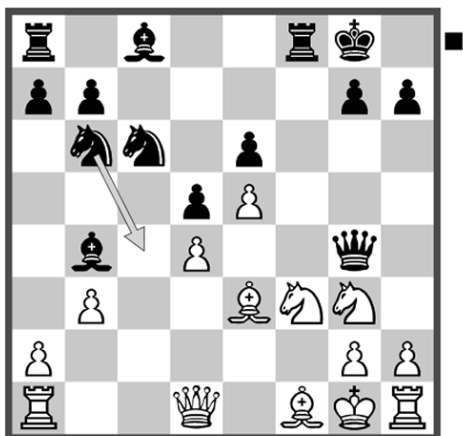
**A)** 13...Ncxe5 White should always watch out for such sacrifices, in this case thankfully they will be able to eliminate queens immediately. 14.dxe5 Nxe5 15.Qd4



*Position after: 15.Qd4*

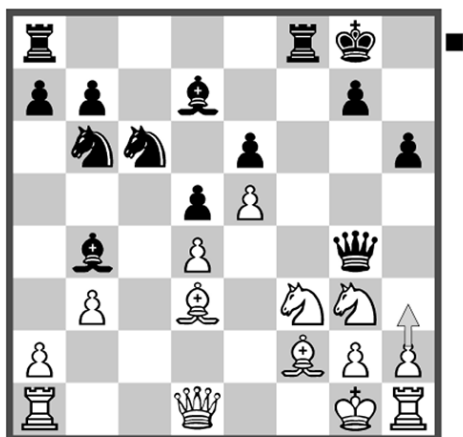
15...Qxd4 [15...Ng4+ 16.Kg1 leaves Black's pieces stuck.]  
16.Bxd4±

**B)** 13...Nb6 14.Kg1 White slowly develops their pieces and Black will soon find it hard to protect their own king from the mounting pressure. 14...Qg4 15.b3!



*Position after: 15.b3!*

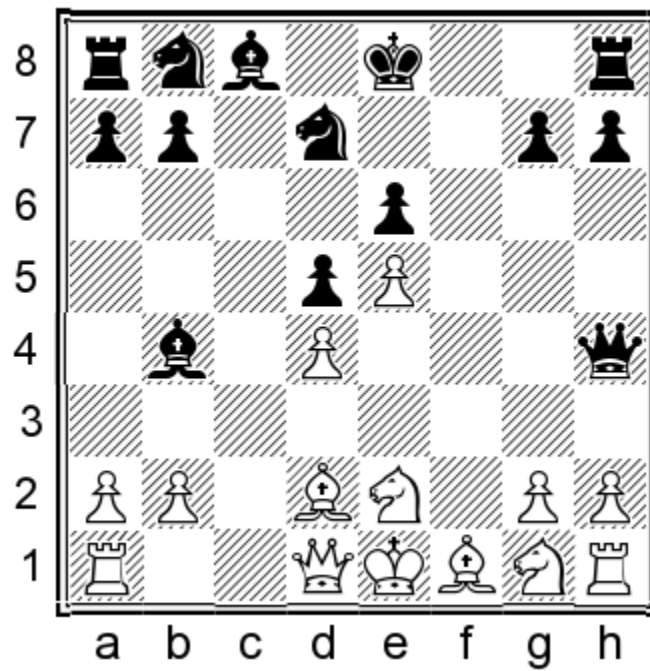
Prophylaxis against ...Nc4. 15...Bd7 16.Bd3 h6 [White is already starting to accumulate threats: 16...Rf7? 17.Bxh7+! Kxh7 18.Ng5++- winning the queen.] 17.Bf2!



*Position after: 17.Bf2!*

Now even the move h2-h3 comes into consideration as the g3-knight is protected by the bishop, e.g. 17...Rf7 18.h3 Qf4 19.Nh5 and her majesty is trapped once again.

**10.Bd2 Qh4+**



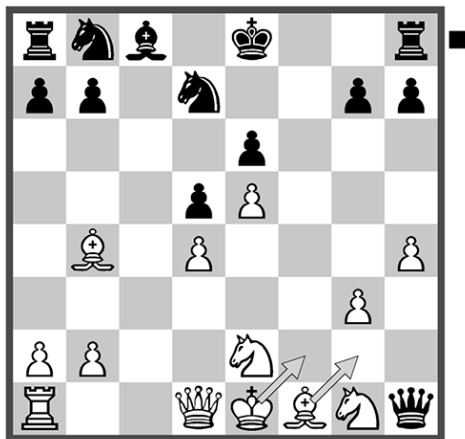
*Position after: 10...Qh4+*

Now Ng3 is not possible due to ...Qxd4.

**11.g3 Qe4?!**

Greediness is not always good!

**12.Bxb4 Qxh1 13.h4!**



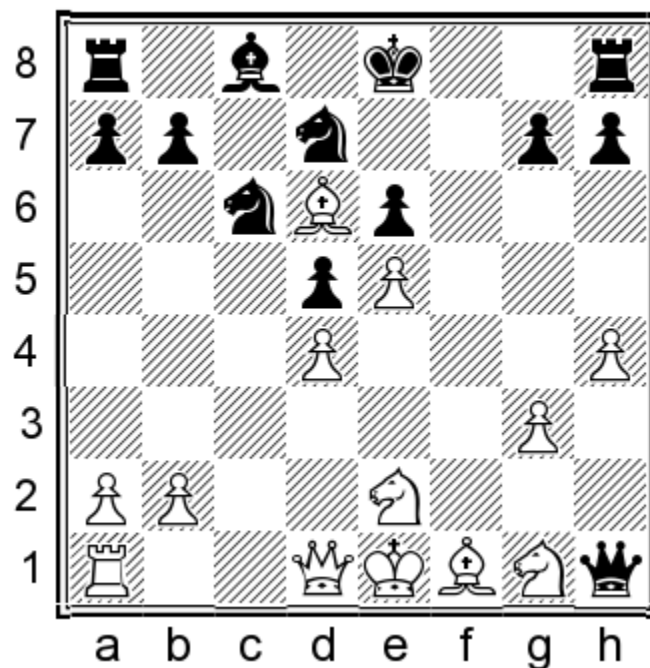
*Position after: 13.h4!*

Not only covering the attacked pawn, but also taking the g5-square away from the black queen. White has tremendously powerful pieces and at the same time Black's queen is almost trapped.

### **13...Nc6**

13...Qe4 Black threatens ...Nxe5, but White's move is a natural one to play anyway. 14.Bd6 Nb6 15.Nh3 Bd7 16.Ng5 Qe3 17.Rc1+- And the queen will be trapped by Rc3!.

### **14.Bd6**

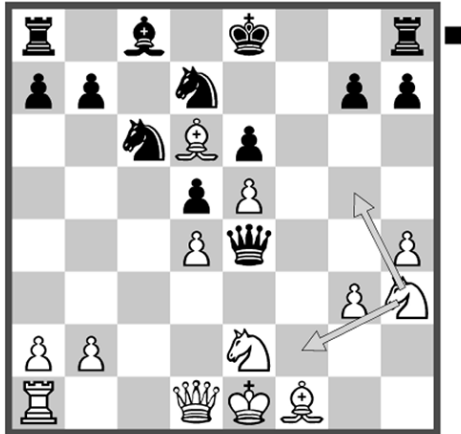


*Position after: 14.Bd6*

### **14...Nb6**

The most testing move. Black is going after the strong d6-bishop, White is trying to capture their opponent's queen. Play becomes very concrete.

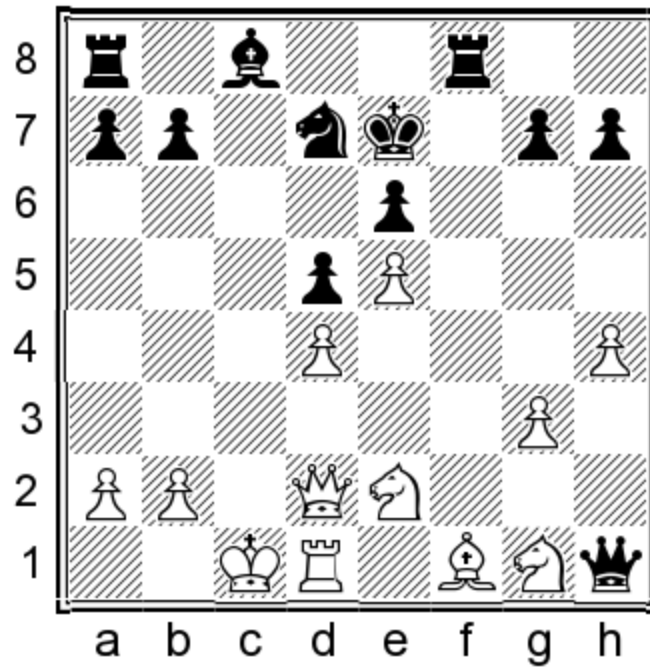
**A)** 14...Qe4 15.Nh3



*Position after: 15.Nh3*

If Black decides to defend against Ng5, their queen can still be attacked by Nf2. 15...h6 16.Nf2 Qf3 [16...Qg6 17.Nf4! Qxg3 18.Qh5++- simply tears Black's position apart.] 17.Rc1± with Rc3, Nf4 and Be2/d3 to come. The bottom line is that Black has no way of untangling their pieces.

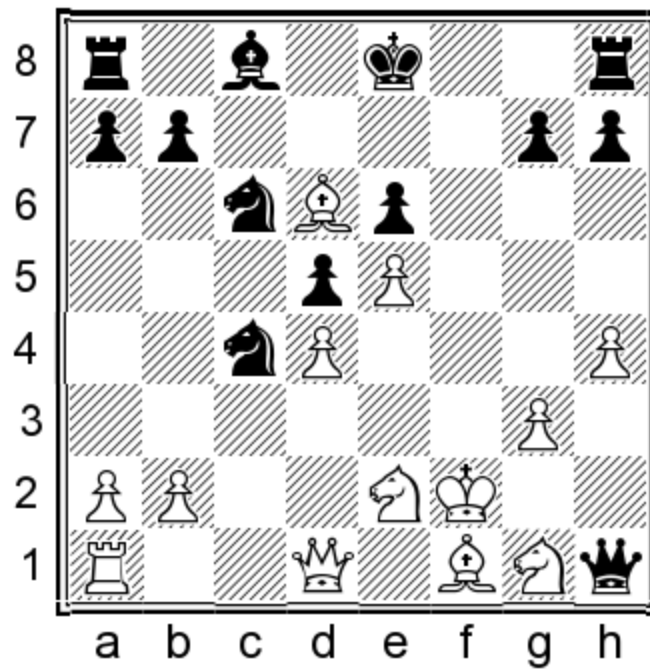
**B)** 14...Ne7 is trying to maneuver the knight to the f5-square, but White has a strong antidote in 15.Bxe7! Kxe7 16.Qd2 Rf8 17.0-0-0.



*Position after: 17.0-0-0*

Black is unable to prevent the white queen from entering their camp, for example 17...h6 runs into 18.Nf4! Qxg1 19.Ng6+ Kd8 20.Nxf8 Nxf8 21.Bg2 Qh2 22.Qf2+- and there is no defense against Rh1.

**15.Kf2 Nc4**



*Position after: 15...Nc4*

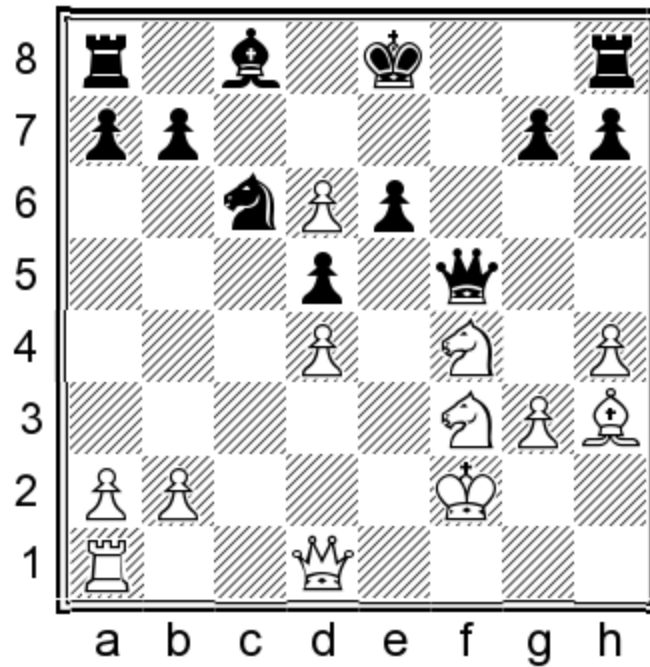
### **16.Nf4**

16.Bg2?? does not work just yet due to 16...Qxg2+! 17.Kxg2 Ne3+-+. Be careful!

### **16...Nxd6**

Bg2 is still impossible, this time due to a knight check on e4.

### **17.exd6 Qe4 18.Nf3 Qf5 19.Bh3**



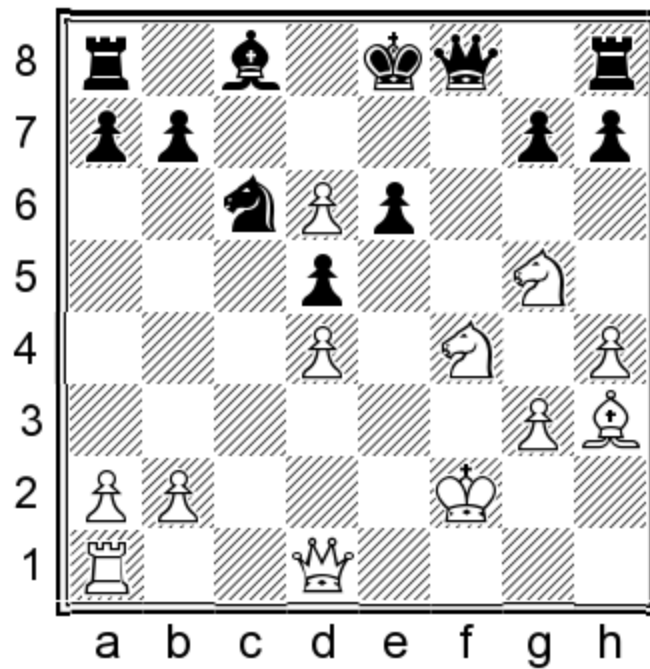
*Position after: 19.Bh3*

### **19...Qf8**

19...Qf6 does not force White to abandon the d4-pawn so White gets a nice grip after 20.Qd3 0-0 21.Re1 with Kg2 to come. White keeps e6 under constant pressure and it is very hard for their opponent to get rid of the annoying pawn on d6.

### **20.Ng5**





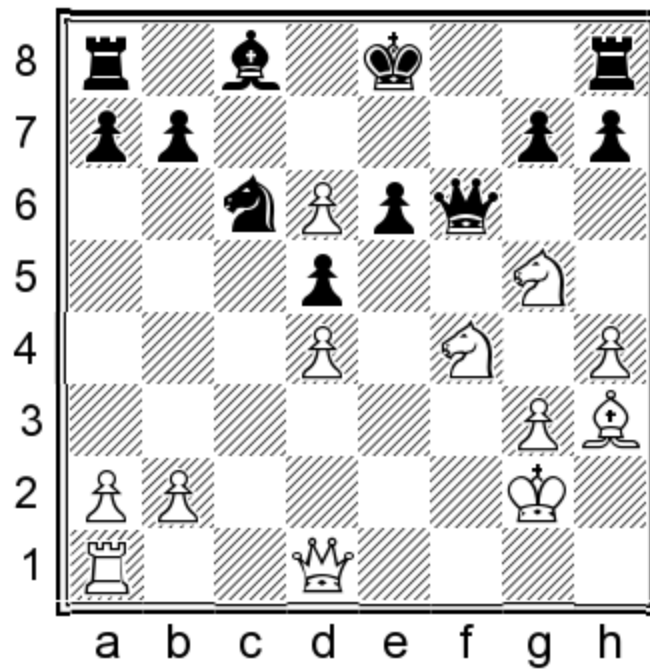
*Position after: 20.Ng5*

## 20...Qf6

The dust has not settled yet. Although Black has managed to unbalance White's support of the d4-square, they are far from being out of the woods.

20...Qxd6 21.Qh5+ g6 22.Nxg6+- is just bad for Black.

## 21.Kg2

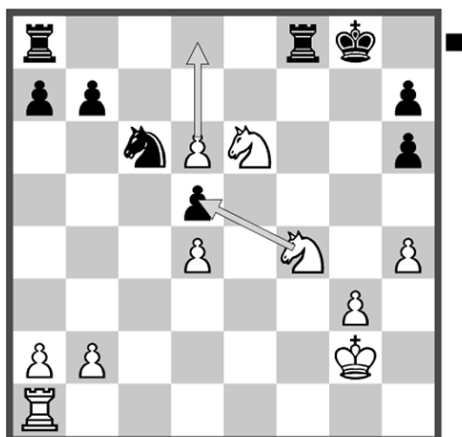


*Position after: 21.Kg2*

## 21...Nxd4

Black simply has to bite the bullet and hope to survive with queens on the board.

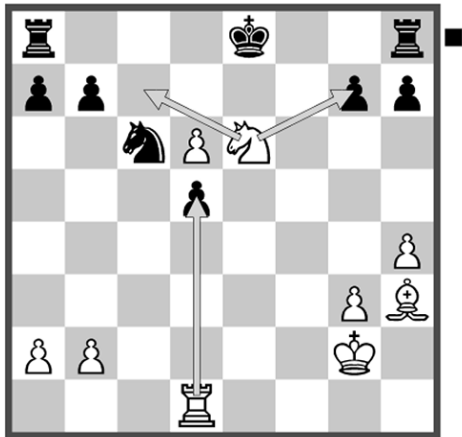
**A)** 21...0-0 22.Qh5 Qh6 23.Bxe6+ Bxe6 24.Qxh6 gxh6 25.Ngxe6



*Position after: 25.Ngxe6*

will simplify into an ending which is clearly superior for White 25...Rfd8 26.Nxd8 Rxd8 27.Rd1<sup>2</sup> Due to their bad pawn formation Black is bound to suffer endlessly.

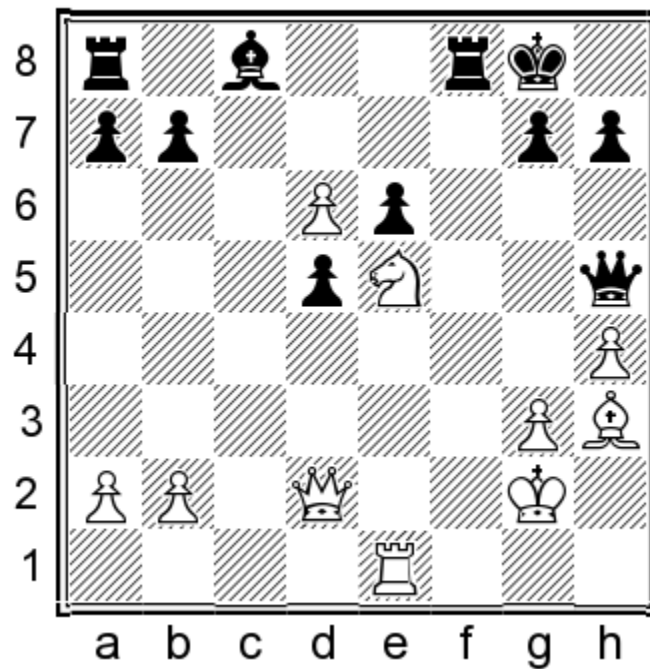
**B)** The endgame after 21...Qxd4 22.Ngxe6 Qxd1 23.Rxd1 Bxe6 24.Nxe6 is also pretty unappealing.



*Position after: 24.Nxe6*

White is simply dominating. 24...Kf7 25.Rf1+ Kg6 26.Rf5 h6 27.h5+ Kh7 28.d7 d4 Desperately trying to hold on the extra pawn, but after 29.Kf2 with Bg2 to follow Black is simply busted. White will choose a suitable moment to take some material back by playing Bxc6 and promoting to a queen, as 29...Nd8 is never possible due to 30.Nf8+ Kg8 31.Ng6.

**22.Nh5 Qe5 23.Qd2™ 23...0-0™ 24.Re1™ 24...Nf3™  
25.Nxf3 Qxh5 26.Ne5<sup>2</sup>**



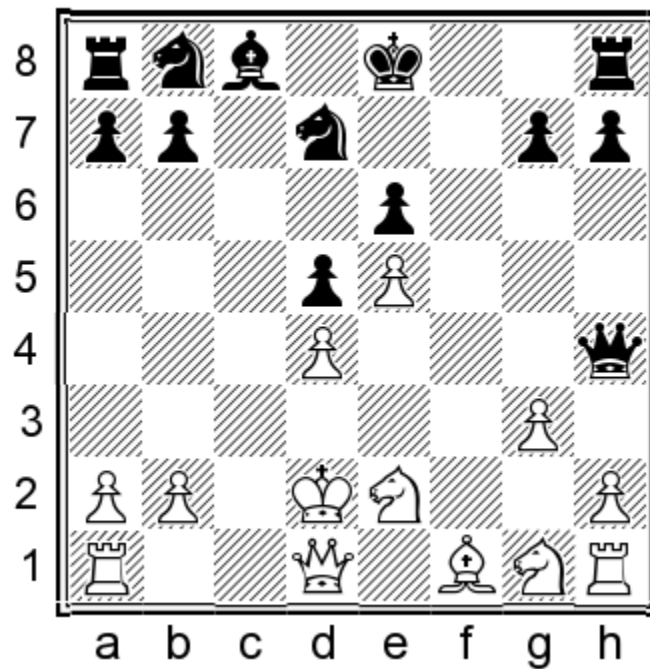
*Position after: 26.Ne5<sup>2</sup>*

White is an exchange and a pawn down. However they have the better piece coordination and a strong pawn on d6. Essentially Black is unable to prevent White from regaining some material back as 26...Rd8 runs into

**27.d7! Bxd7 28.Nxd7 Rxd7 29.Bxe6+±**

**b) 11...Bxd2+**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 cxd4 7.cxd4 f6 8.f4 fxe5 9.fxe5 Bb4+ 10.Bd2 Qh4+ 11.g3 Bxd2+ 12.Kxd2!N**



*Position after: 12.Kxd2!N*

Two games were played in this position and both went Qxd2 which is a serious mistake.

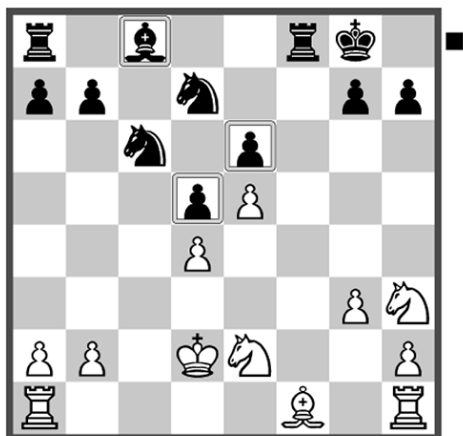
### **12...Qe4**

Black should accept the challenge and take the rook on h1.

12...Qh6+ 13.Ke1

**A)** 13...0-0 14.Qc1! is the precise way of exchanging queens in this position. Black has to decide whether they'll enter an inferior ending or let their queen be attacked by enemy knights [14.Qd2?? Rxf1+!-+ would be quite embarrassing.]. 14...Qg6 15.Nh3

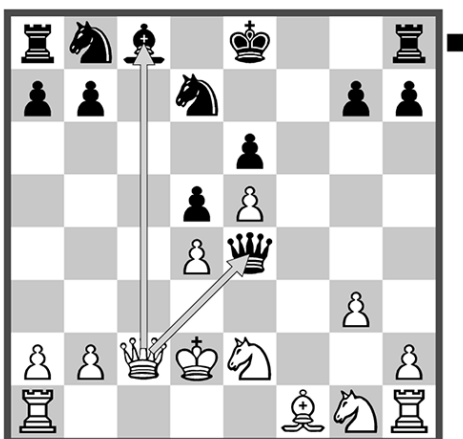
**B)** 13...Nc6 14.Qd2 Qxd2+ 15.Kxd2 0-0 16.Nh3



*Position after: 16.Nh3*

White has a superior position with better pieces. Black bishop on c8 will have a tough time coming back into play.

**13.Qc2**



*Position after: 13.Qc2*

**13...Nc5!**

Distracting the white queen from attacking both e4 and c8.

**A) 13...Qxc2+ 14.Kxc2<sup>2</sup>** As explained earlier these positions are better for White thanks to their spatial

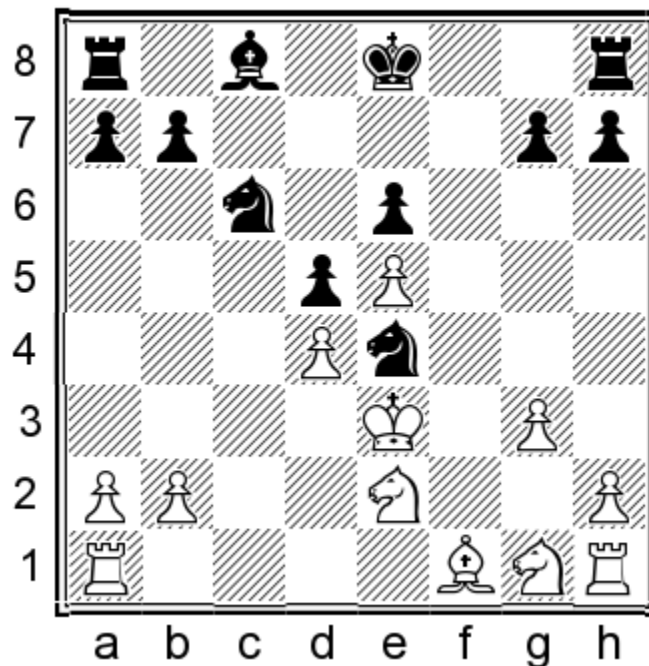
advantage and the inferiority of Black's bishop.

**B)** The immediate 13...Qxh1 runs into 14.Qxc8+ Ke7 15.Qxh8+–, so Black employs a rather paradoxical diverting idea on move 13 instead.

### 14.Qxe4

14.Qxc5 Nc6 15.Nf3 Qxf3 16.Bh3 Bd7∞ With queens on board and the white king floating in the middle of nowhere, this position is pretty unclear.

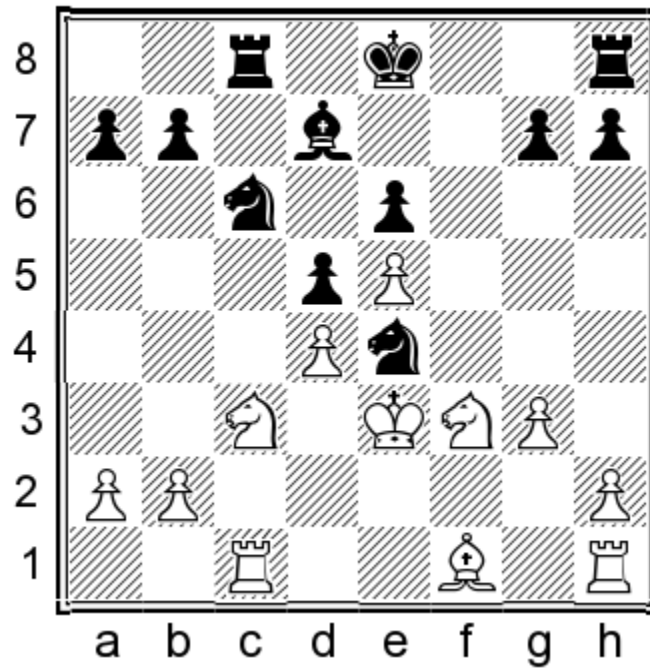
### 14...Nxe4+ 15.Ke3 Nc6



*Position after: 15...Nc6*

Black successfully navigated through all of our traps into a relatively favorable version of the previously mentioned endgame thanks to the e4-knight being pretty active. Yet

we can still try to harass their centralized knight with  
 16.Nf3 Bd7 17.Rc1 Rc8 18.Nc3  
 18.Nf4 g5 19.Nh5 Ke7 20.Bd3 Be8 is getting quite murky.



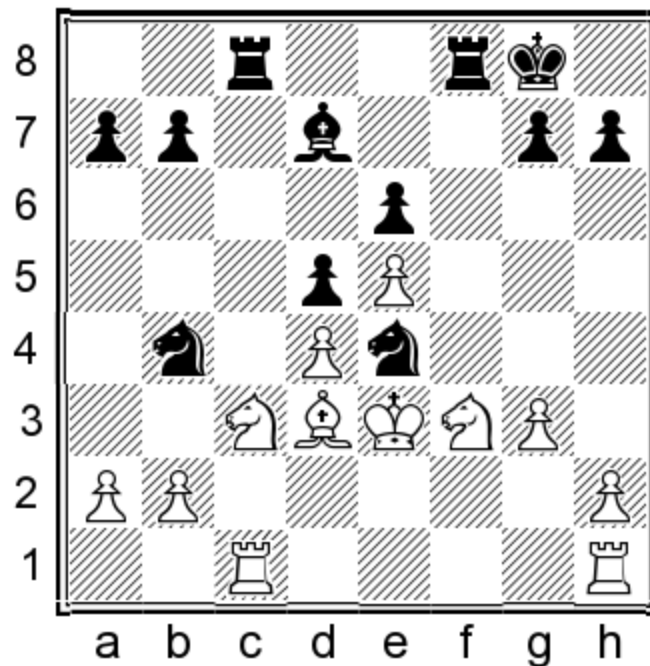
*Position after: 18.Nc3*

**18...0-0! 19.Bd3**

19.Nxe4? Rxf3+! is the point behind Black's castling.  
 20.Kxf3 Nxd4+ 21.Ke3 Rxc1

**19...Nb4!**





*Position after: 19...Nb4!*

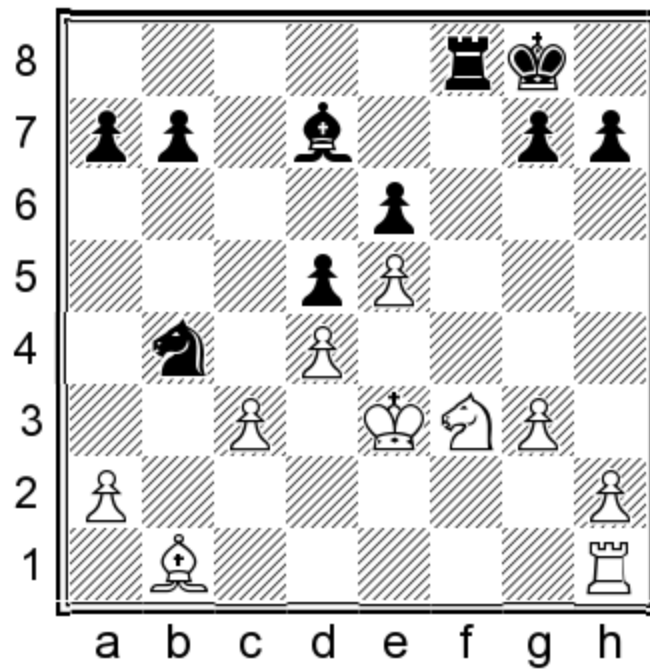
As Black defended well for a long time it is only logical that he is not really worse.

## **20.Bb1**

A safe bet for White.

The complications after 20.Bxe4 dxe4 21.Nd2 Nd3 can certainly be analyzed further, but the strong knight on d3 generates plenty of counterplay for Black.

**20...Nxc3 21.Rxc3 Rxc3+ 22.bxc3**



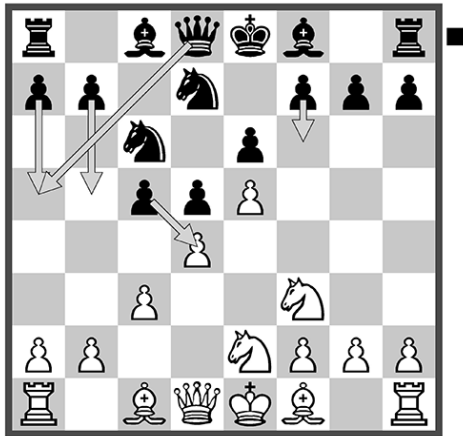
*Position after: 22.bxc3*

Objectively speaking Black should be fine, although with the d7-bishop always a bit passive it is certainly the second player who needs to be more precise here.

# Chapter 7

## 7th move options for Black

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 7 - 7th move options for Black

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6  
7.Nf3

a) 7...b5 8.Nf4

b) 7...b5 8.a3

c) 7...a5!?

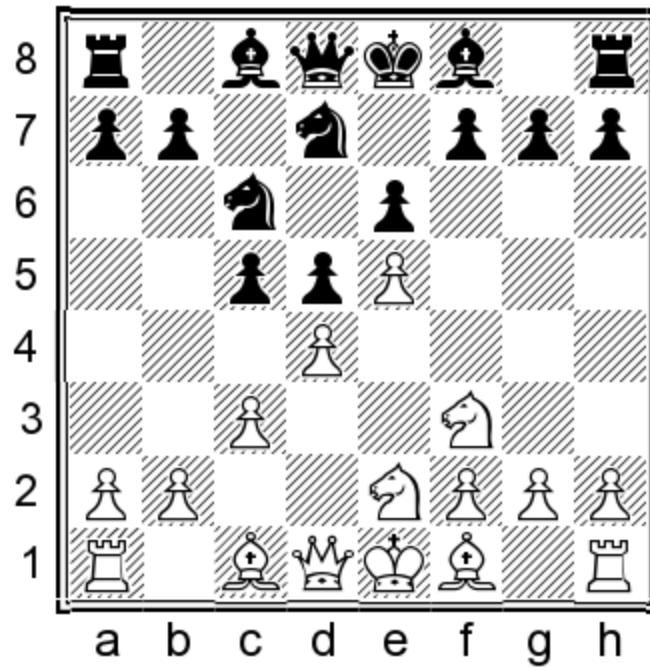
d) 7...Qa5

e) 7...f6?

f) 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 f6

**a) 7...b5 8.Nf4**

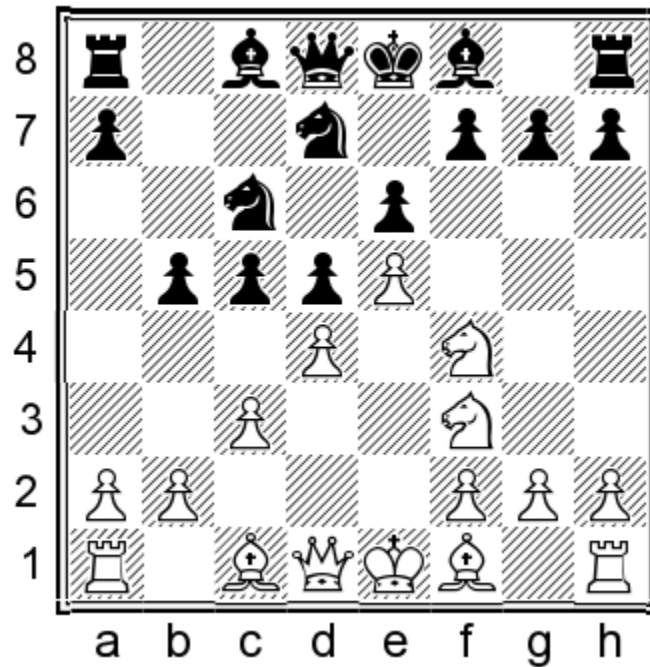
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3  
Nc6 7.Nf3**



*Position after: 7.Nf3*

We have come to the biggest branch in the whole 5.Nce2 system. Besides the most natural development with 7...Be7, and 7...Qb6, which are the toughest nuts to crack – each of them has their own dedicated chapter – there are numerous ways Black can try to trick us.

**7...b5 8.Nf4**

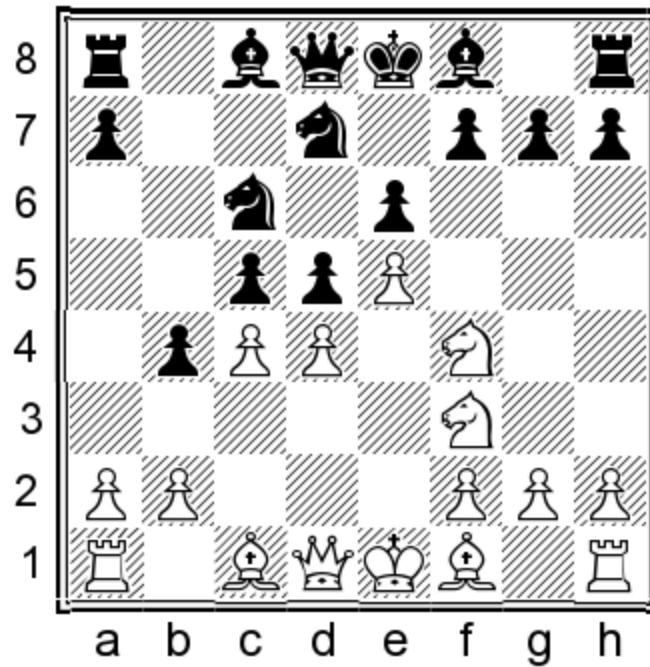


*Position after: 8.Nf4*

Surprisingly, I have had two games in this variation, both of which I won. I think ...b5 is premature for Black, and I recommend both a3 and Nf4. Ultimately it depends on personal choice. Let us analyze both options.

**8...Qb6**

8...b4 9.c4!



*Position after: 9.c4!*

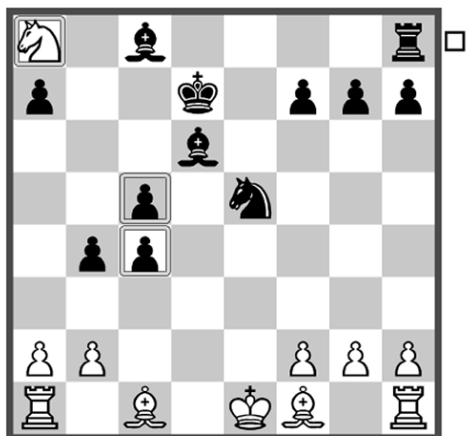
This is a recurring theme in the Nf4 lines. Black should not advance their queenside so soon as they are not ready for a direct encounter in the center. 9...dxc4 10.d5 exd5

[10...Ncxe5 is not so testing and White will easily collect the sacrificed pawns back and claim a positional edge.

11.dxe6 fxe6 12.Nxe5 Nxe5 13.Qh5+ Nf7 14.Bxc4 Bd6

15.Nxe6 Bxe6 16.Bxe6<sup>2</sup> with a nice position.] 11.Qxd5

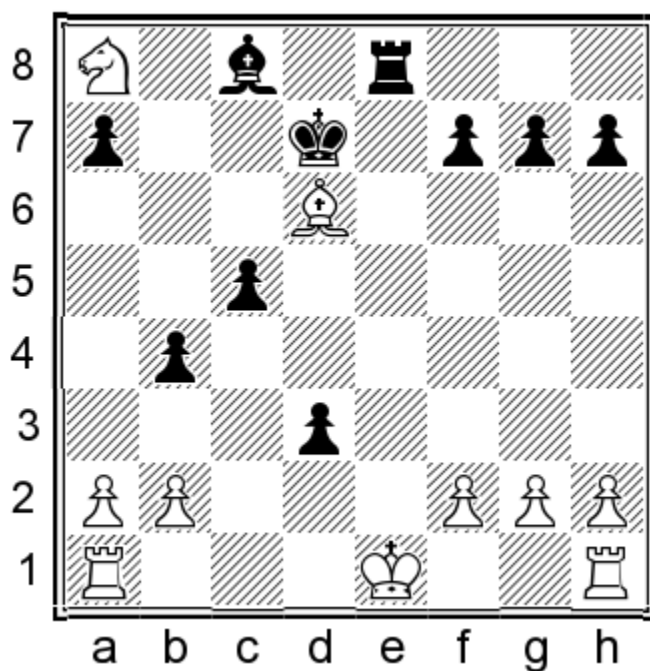
Ndxe5 12.Nxe5 Qxd5 13.Nxd5 Nxe5 14.Nc7+ Kd7 15.Nxa8 Bd6



*Position after: 15...Bd6*

Black will eventually capture the a8-knight so they will be an exchange down for two pawns, though their pawn structure is far from being ideal. It won't be an easy technical task for White to convert their advantage but they are playing for a win with not much risk. 16.Bf4

**A)** 16...Nd3+ 17.Bxd3 cxd3 18.Bxd6 Re8+

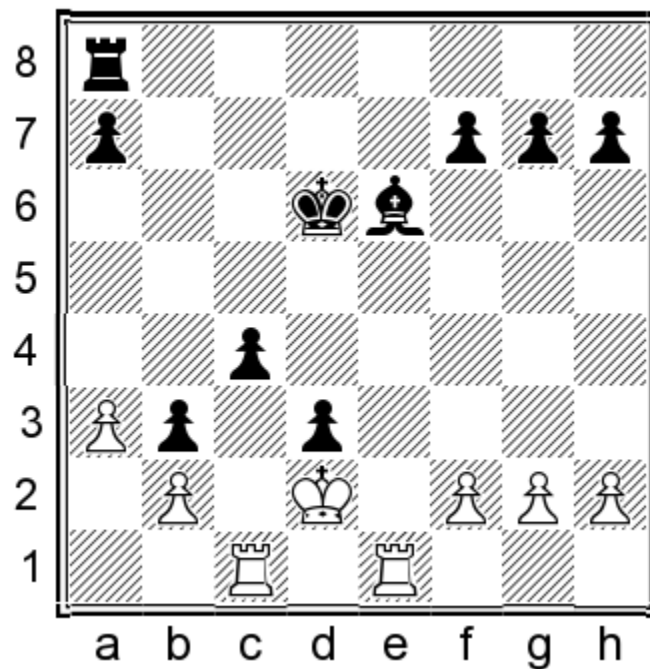




*Position after: 18...Re8+*

19.Kd1 [19.Kd2? is more of a suicidal move than an active king advance as 19...Re2+ 20.Kxd3?? Ba6# is mate!]

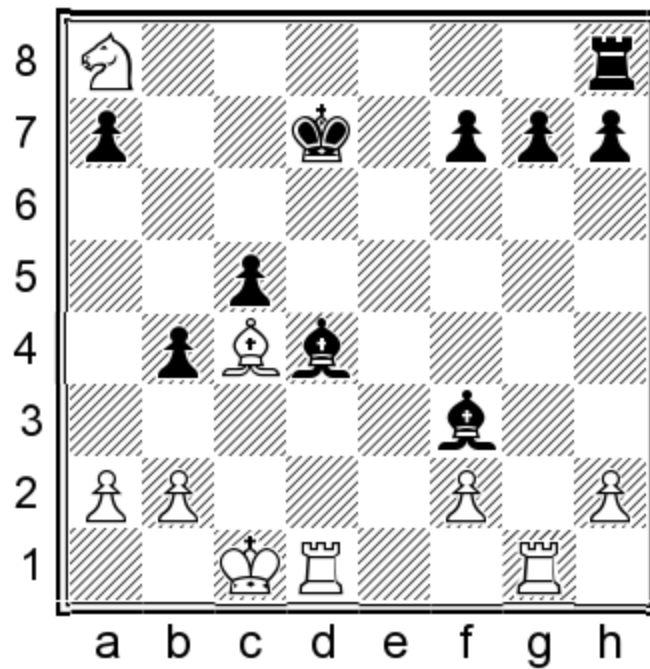
19...Kxd6 20.Re1 Be6 21.a3! Note that in this endgame it is always useful to clarify the situation on the queenside with a3 as Black would definitely like to avoid opening the a-file for White's a1-rook. 21...b3 22.Rc1 Rxa8 23.Kd2 c4



*Position after: 23...c4*

Here we can readily convert the material advantage into a positional one by going for the pure rook endgame with 24.Rxe6+ fxe6 25.Rxc4 a5 26.Kxd3±. Black's queenside is overextended and the pawns are weak.

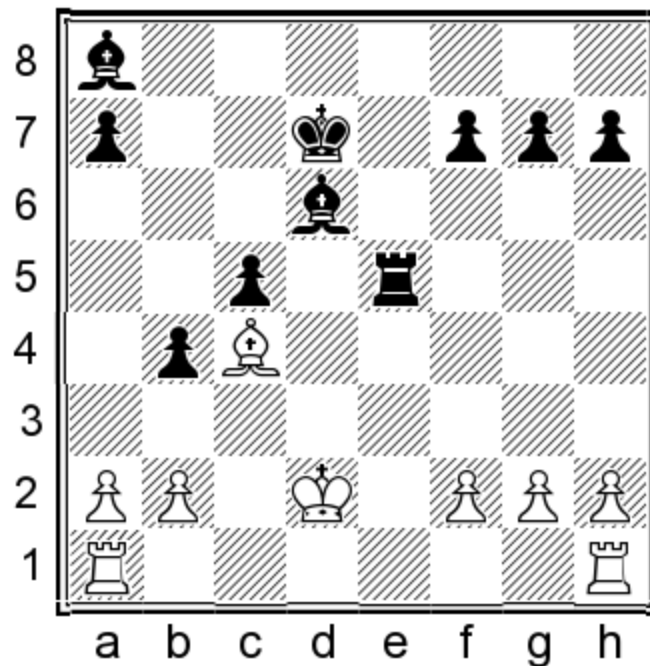
**B)** 16...Bb7 also turns out in White's favor. 17.Bxe5 Bxe5 18.0-0-0+ Bd4 19.Bxc4 Bxg2! 20.Rhg1 Bf3



*Position after: 20...Bf3*

Black is being quite tricky before finally capturing the a8-knight so we can transform our advantage once again with 21.Rxd4+! cxd4 22.Rxg7 Bxa8 23.Rxf7+ Kd6 24.Kd2<sup>2</sup> with a great position. All of Black's pawns are very weak.

**C)** 16...Re8 17.Bxe5 Rxe5+ 18.Kd2 Bb7 19.Bxc4 Bxa8

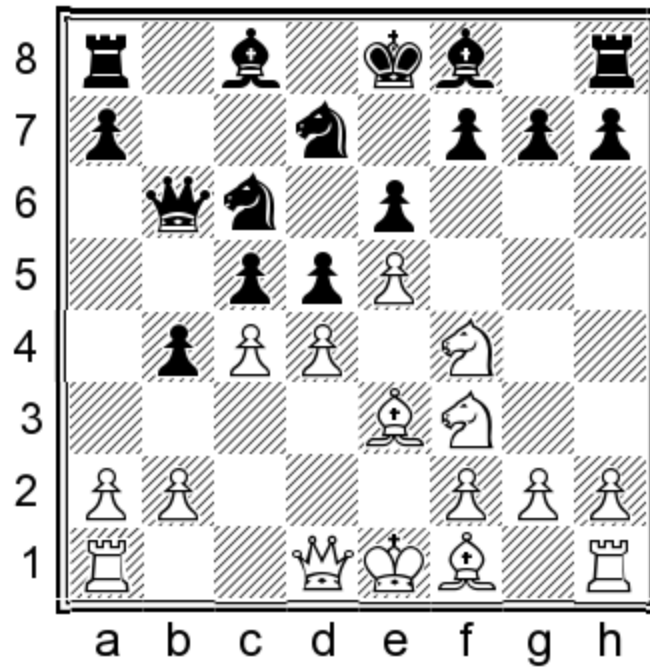


*Position after: 19...Bxa8*

We see a similar scenario unfolding – Black has some compensation in the form of their bishop pair and a pawn for the exchange, but it is insufficient for full equality. We probe Black’s position with the natural 20.a3 push, and after 20...a5 just solidify our ranks with 21.f3<sup>2</sup>. It will take a lot of work for Black to defend this endgame successfully.

## **9.Be3!**

We are getting ready for the center opening up after 9...b4 10.c4!

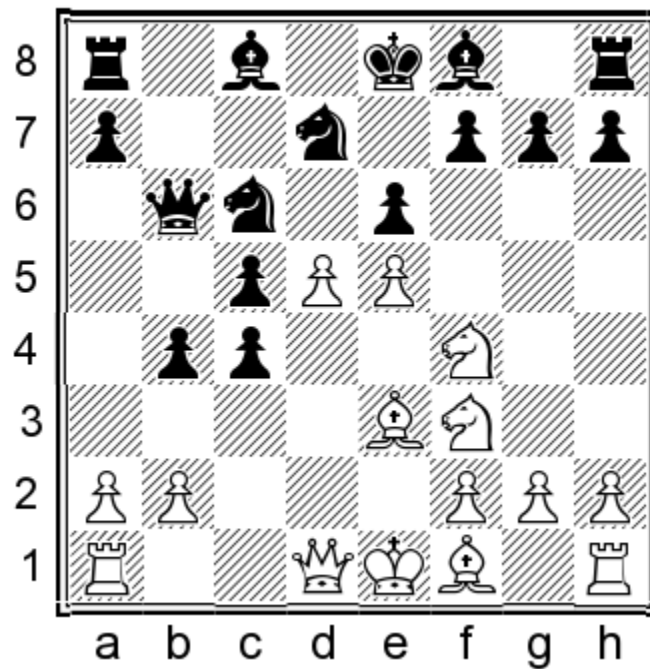


*Position after: 10.c4!*

when the bishop comes in handy on e3.

**10...cxd4**

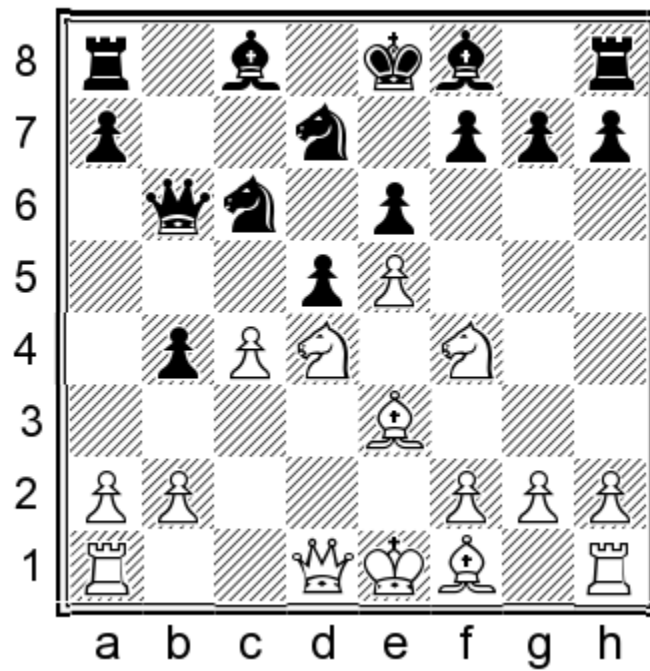
The d5-push after 10...dxc4 11.d5!



*Position after: 11.d5!*

is an essential part of White's plan to open the center as much as possible. They have a very nice position after the forced sequence 11...Ncxe5 12.dxe6 fxe6 13.Nxe5 Nxe5 14.Qh5+ Nf7 15.Bxc4± when it is only a matter of time before the weak e6 and c5-pawns start falling. White will castle and bring their rooks into the center, while Black has to worry about their weaknesses constantly.

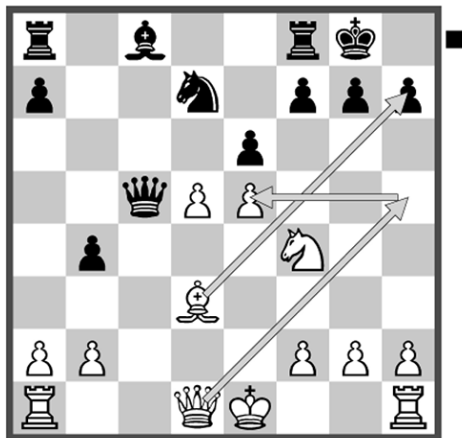
**11.Nxd4**



*Position after: 11.Nxd4*

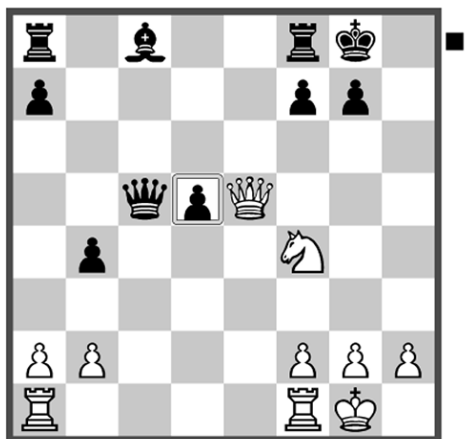
**11...Bc5**

White consolidates their advantage easily after 11...Nxd4  
 12.Bxd4 Bc5 13.Bxc5 Qxc5 14.cxd5 0-0 15.Bd3!



*Position after: 15.Bd3!*

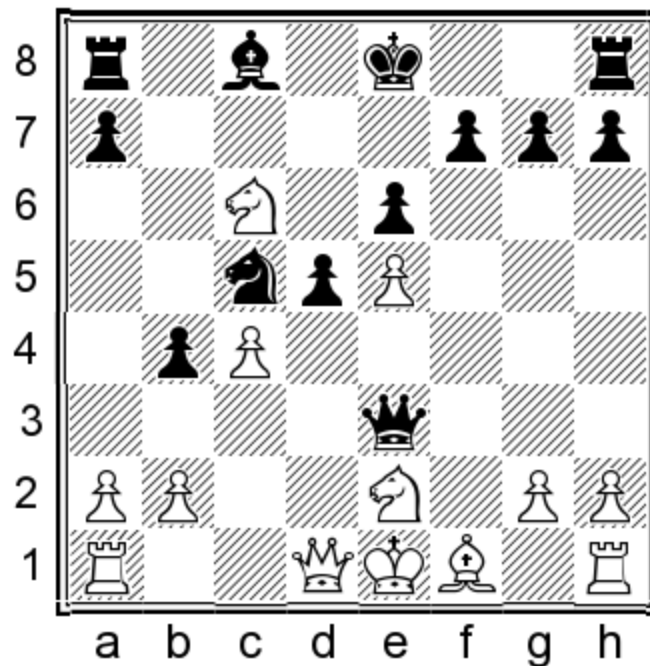
as the e5-pawn is protected thanks to a variation on the famous French Bxh7+ trick. 15...exd5 [15...Nxe5 16.Bxh7+! Kxh7 17.Qh5+ Kg8 18.Qxe5<sup>2</sup> with castling to follow is the same idea.] 16.0-0 Nxe5 17.Bxh7+ Kxh7 18.Qh5+ Kg8 19.Qxe5<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 19.Qxe5<sup>2</sup>*

White has a nice advantage mainly thanks to the d5-pawn being quite weak and White's queen + knight tandem being active in the center.

**12.Nxc6 Bxe3 13.fxe3 Qxe3+! 14.Ne2 Nc5!**

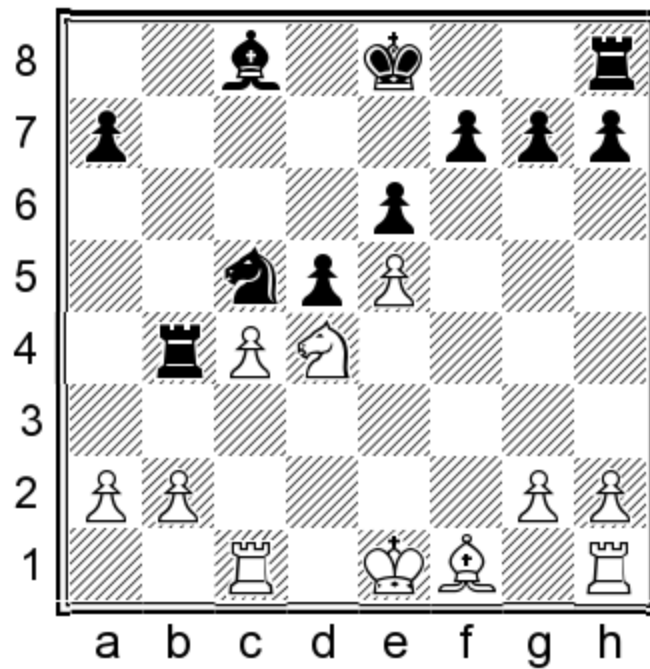


*Position after: 14...Nc5!*

This is the most resilient defense. Although they are a piece down right now, Black threatens to deliver a killer check on d3 with their knight. It is not so obvious how White can defend, as after 15.Nxb4 Rb8

Black intends to capture the b4-knight at all costs and renew the threat of playing ...Nd3. Thankfully we can navigate into a better endgame with 16.Qd4! Qxd4 17.Nxd4 Rxb4 18.Rc1



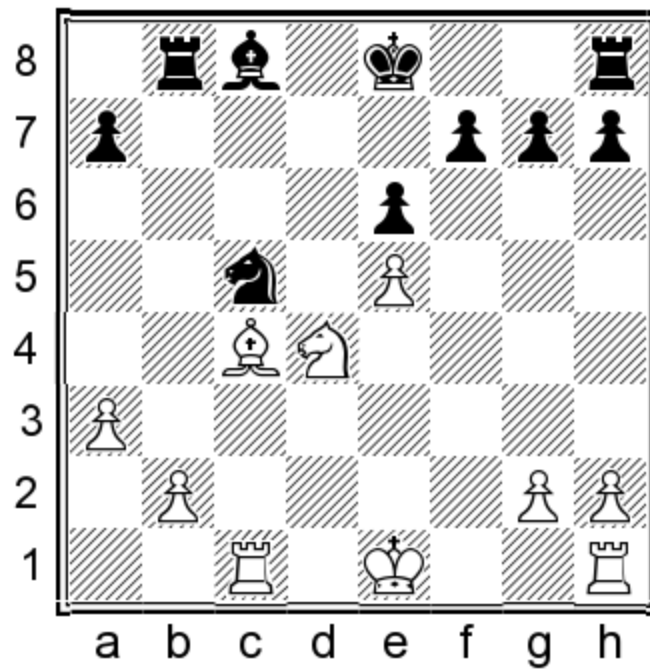


*Position after: 18.Rc1*

Due to the fact that many pieces are hanging on the c-file, Black will not be in time to capture the b2-pawn. Therefore White will have the better chances as they have more space, and the pawn duo on the queenside is rather dangerous as a passed pawn can be created quickly. Note that after 18...dxc4

White can keep more pieces on the board with 19.a3! Rb8 19...Rxb2? 20.Rxc4+- loses material for Black.

**20.Bxc4<sup>2</sup>**

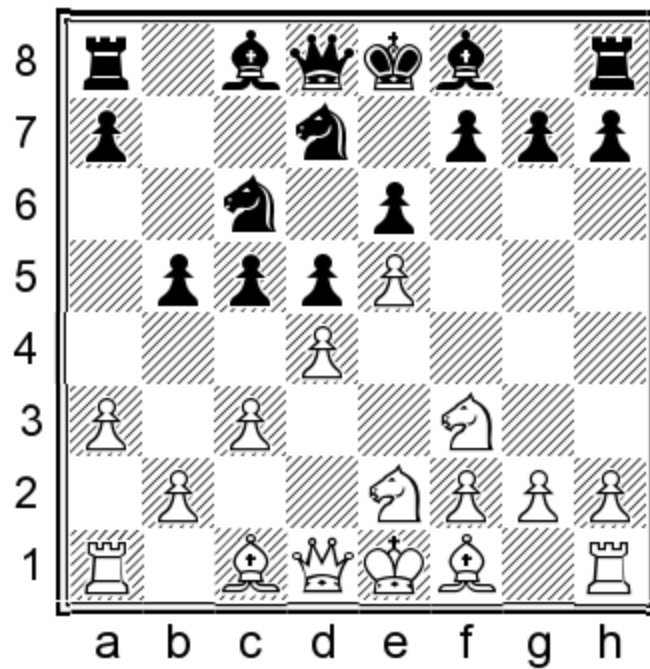


*Position after: 20.Bxc4<sup>2</sup>*

It is always a good idea to keep the position more tense and keep pieces on the board when you have a space advantage.

**b) 7...b5 8.a3**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 b5 8.a3**



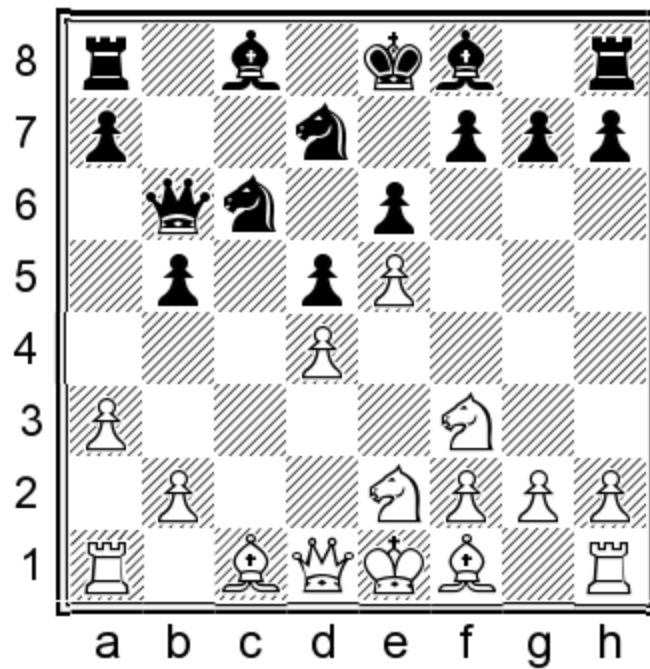
*Position after: 8.a3*

Aiming to meet ...b4 with axb4.

**8...a5**

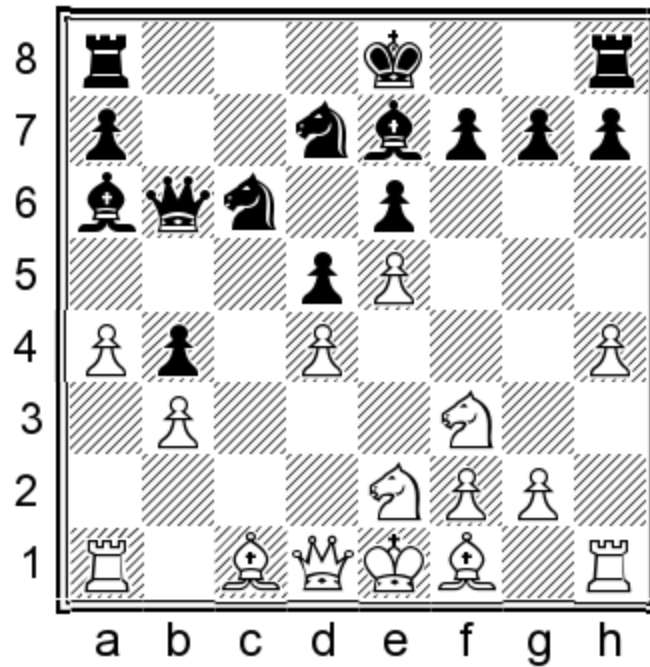
8...cxd4 9.cxd4

**A)** 9...Qb6 Trying to push the b-pawn as far as possible.



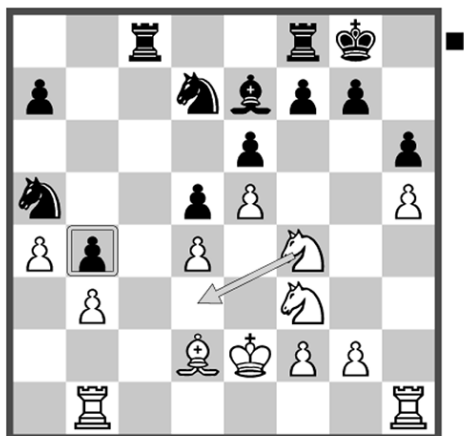
*Position after: 9...Qb6*

10.b3 Not allowing Black to play b3 [10.Nf4 b4 11.a4 b3 is the type of counterplay we'd rather avoid.] 10...b4 11.a4 Be7 12.h4 Ba6



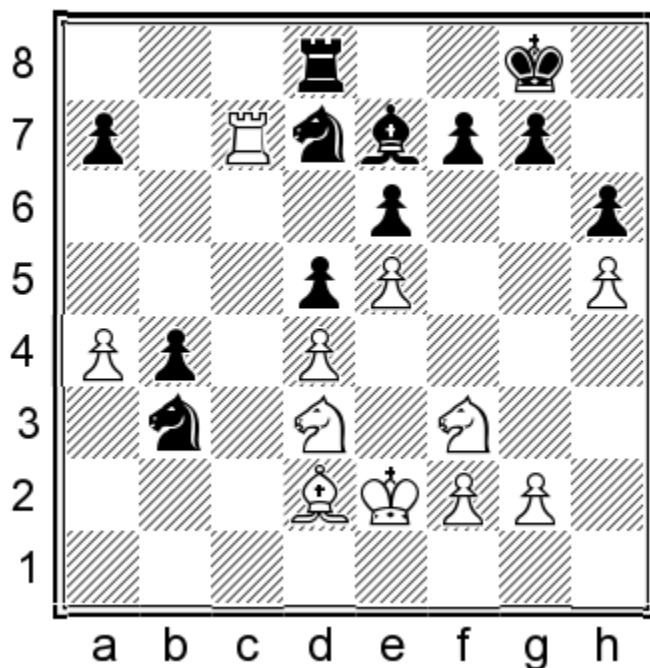
*Position after: 12...Ba6*

The idea of exchanging light-squared bishops is positionally sound for Black, but in this particular position it comes at a great cost. White utilizes the tempi they have been given to advance on the kingside and, to be frank, I doubt that the e7-bishop is very happy about the black pawn's advance to b4. 13.h5 h6 14.Nf4 Rc8 15.Bxa6 Qxa6 16.Rb1 Na5 17.Bd2 0-0 18.Qe2 Qxe2+ 19.Kxe2 Thanks to the white knight on f4 Black is unable to create counterplay with ...f7-f6.



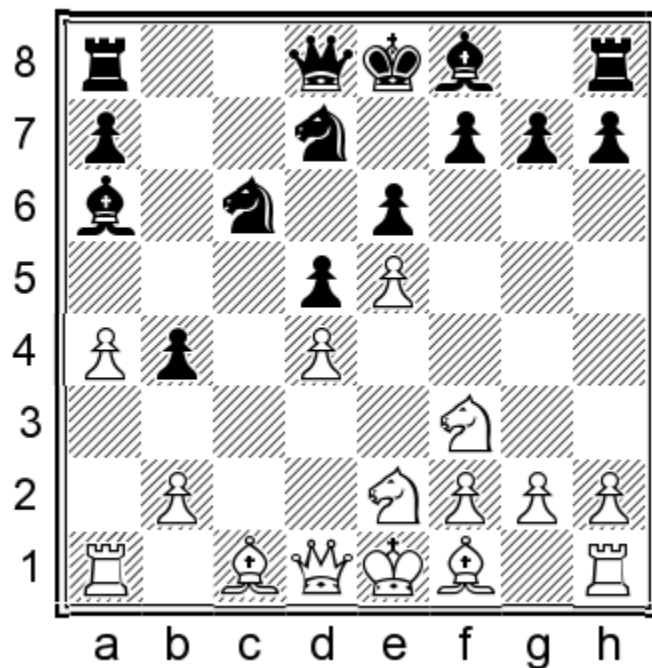
*Position after: 19.Kxe2*

At the same time White's plan is to maneuver the knight to d3 and start targeting Black's queenside. Please note that 19...Rc2 runs into 20.Rhc1 Rxc1 21.Rxc1 Nxb3 22.Rc7 Rd8 23.Nd3



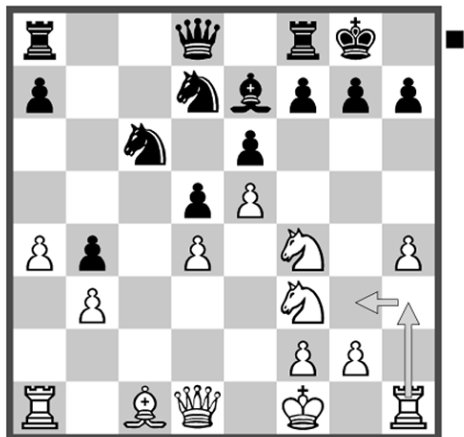
*Position after: 23.Nd3*

and Black isn't able to defend all their weaknesses.  
 23...Nxd2 [23...a5 24.Be3 with Kd1-c2 to follow is even worse.] 24.Nxd2 a5 25.Nb3+- **B)** 9...b4 10.a4 Ba6



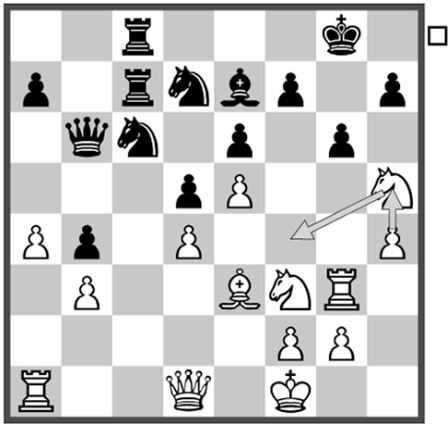
*Position after: 10...Ba6*

**B1)** 11.b3 Be7 12.Nf4 Bxf1 13.Kxf1 0-0 14.h4! Quite a nasty idea. Since Black cannot do anything in the center because of the brilliantly positioned Nf4, White cannot be punished for their insolent kingside expansion.



*Position after: 14.h4!*

It also magically solves the ugly placement of White's king's rook which will come to the third rank with great effect. 14...Qb6 15.Be3 Rfc8 16.Rh3 White has plenty of moves in stock. They can easily build up more pressure with Rg3 and Nh5, creating the first serious threats in just two moves. If Black decides to stop White's rook with ...g6 after say 16...Rc7 17.Rg3 Rac8 18.Nh5 g6,

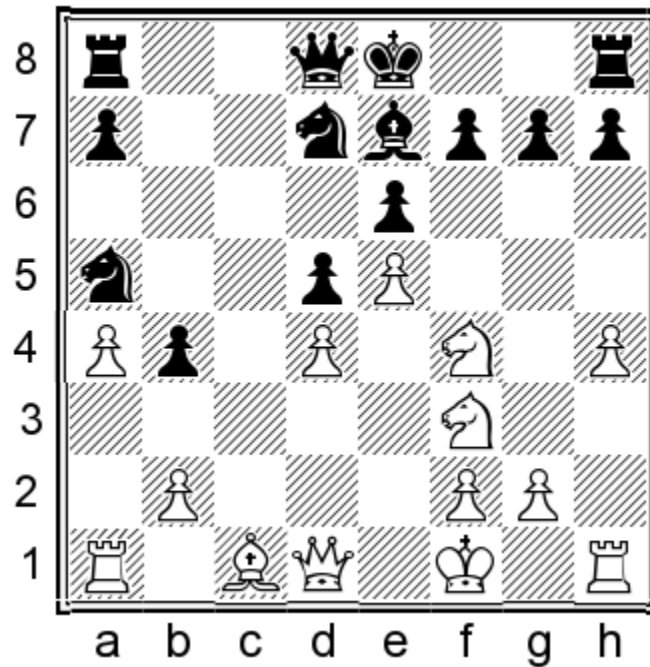


*Position after: 18...g6*

they are only giving White the hook on the kingside they needed. After White plays a subsequent Nf4 and h5 Black will be swiftly crushed.

**B2)** 11.Nf4 is another possible option. 11...Bxf1 12.Kxf1 Be7 13.h4 Na5

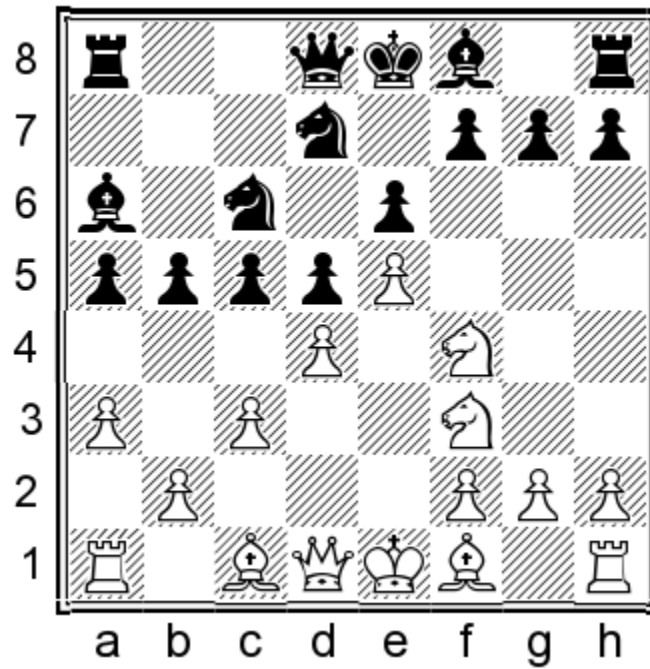




*Position after: 13...Na5*

And what is Black threatening now? 14.b3! There is no reason for White to allow Black to push their pawn to b3. 14...Rc8 15.Be3 Qc7 16.Ne1! with Rh3 to come. The last White's move was quite important as it prevented ...Qc2.

**9.Nf4 Ba6**

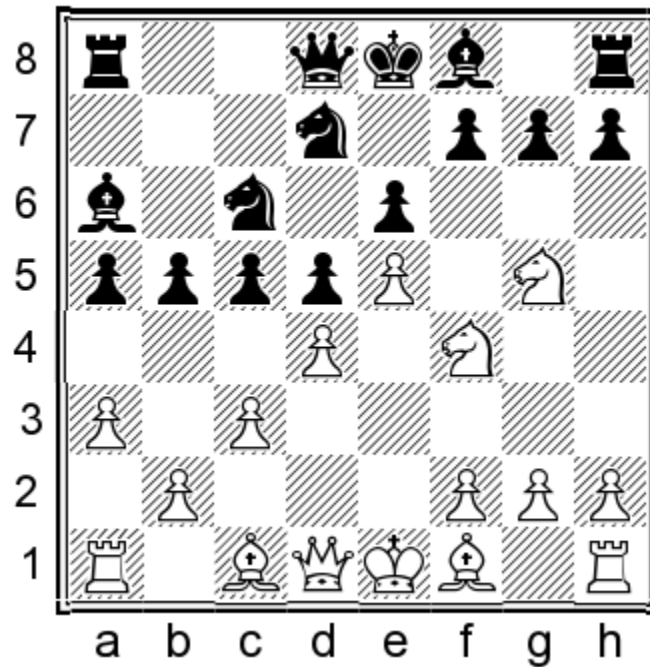


*Position after: 9...Ba6*

## 10.h4

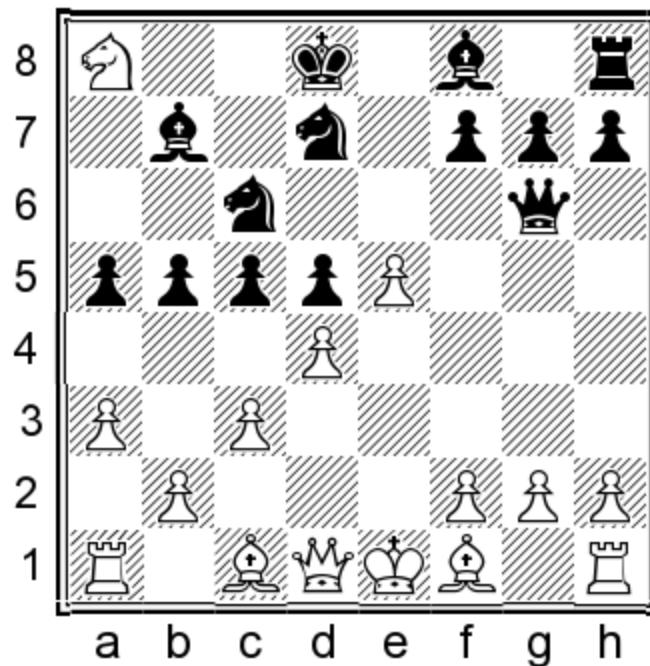
Now Ng5 turns into a real threat.

**A)** 10.Ng5 is quite tempting but we should hold our horses a while longer.



*Position after: 10.Ng5*

**A1)** Black can enter the complications after 10...Qxg5 11.Nxe6 Qg6 12.Nc7+ Kd8 13.Nxa8 Bb7. Black will pick up a second piece for their rook and since the pawn on g2 is hanging, they are in time to close the position with ...c4 as well.

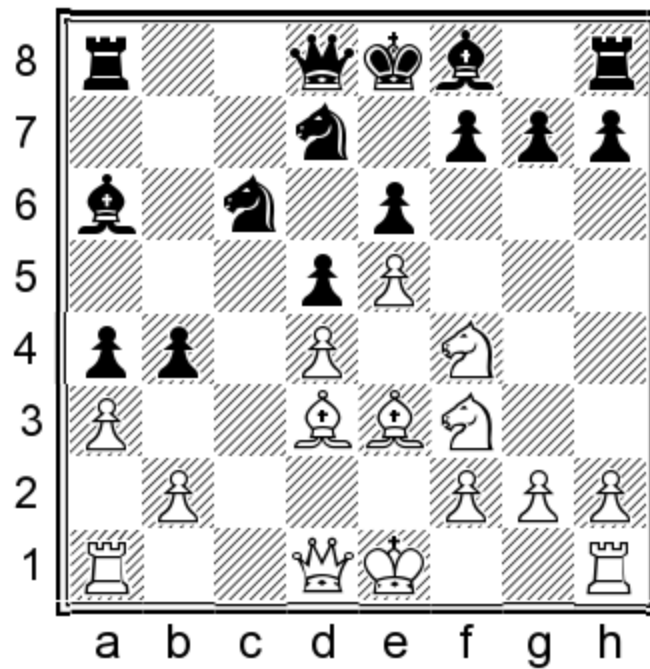


*Position after: 13...Bb7*

**A2)** 10...Be7 11.Ngxe6 fxe6 12.Nxe6, would be perfect for White. Generally speaking three pawns and a continuing attack should be more than enough for a sacrificed piece.

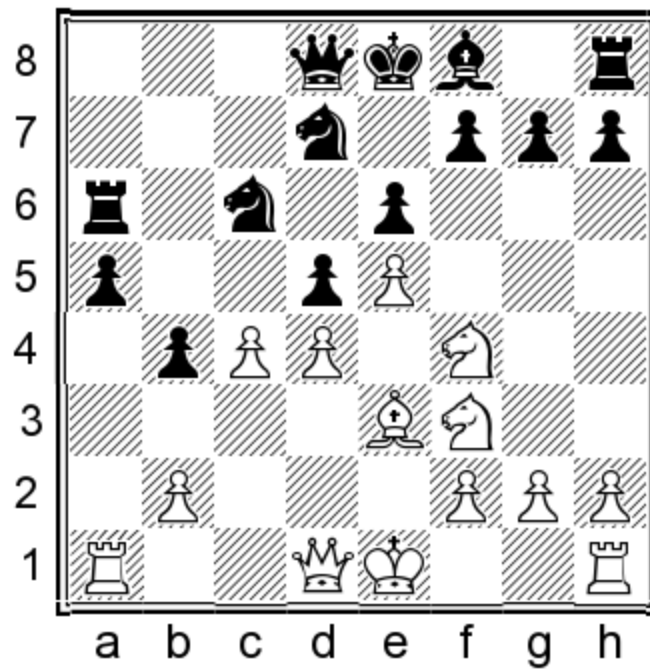
**A3)** 10...cxd4 11.cxd4 Qxg5 12.Nxe6 Qh4 13.Nc7+ Kd8 14.Nxa8 Qxd4 15.e6 Qe5+ 16.Be2 fxe6 17.0-0 is also not great for Black.

**B)** I also checked 10.Be3 which works very well in the event of 10...b4 [However 10...cxd4 11.cxd4 a4 12.Bd3 b4



*Position after: 12...b4*

allows Black more play than I'm willing to give them. We'd love to play 13.Bxa6 Rxa6 14.axb4, but because of the 10th move 14...Bxb4+ is an unpleasant check!] 11.Bxa6 Rxa6 12.axb4 cxb4 13.c4!

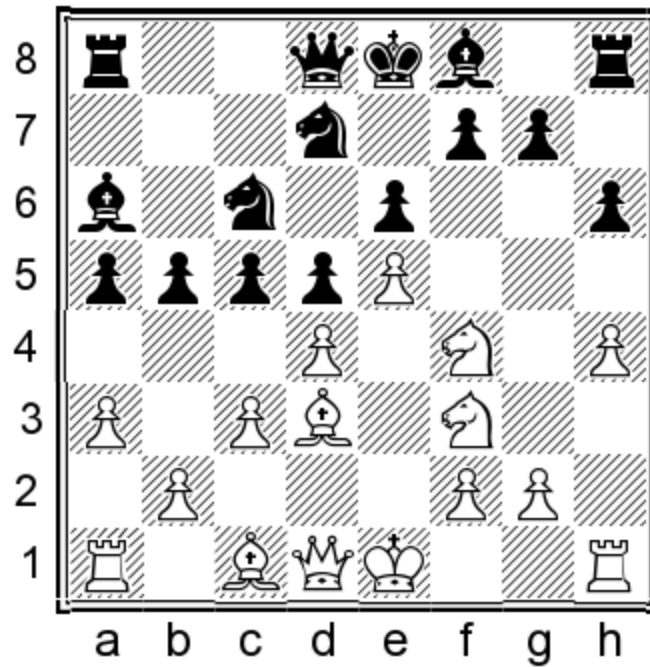


*Position after: 13.c4!*

and Black's position explodes. 13...dxc4 14.d5 Ncxe5  
 15.dxe6 fxe6 16.Nxe5 Nxe5 17.Qh5+ Ultimately the  
 awkward Ra6 will be the main culprit of Black's demise.  
 17...Nf7 18.Qb5+- 10...h6

10...Be7 does not stop anything: 11.Ng5 Bxg5 12.hxg5 Qxg5  
 13.Nxe6.

**11.Bd3**



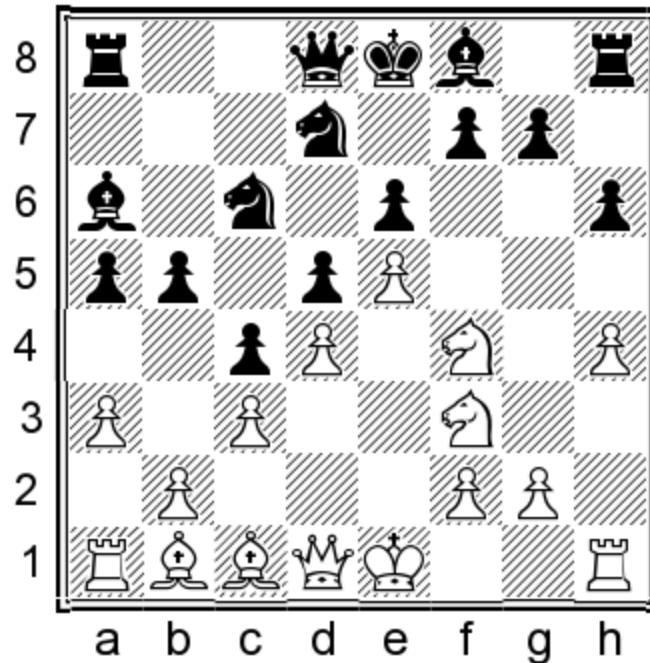
*Position after: 11.Bd3*

## **11...b4**

Consistently trying to get counterplay at all costs, but thanks to the move a3 we are well prepared for that.

**A)** 11...c4 is not very impressive. Black usually enters this structure with either a knight on b3, a bishop on a4, or a queen on h7. With all their pieces locked on the queenside and the white bishop on the active b1-h7 diagonal, their position is simply cramped and White will eventually break through on the kingside. We will fix the position with h4-h5, maneuver our queen to g4 and slowly prepare the f4-f5 advance. 12.Bb1 Moving to c2 is of course the more natural move, but it might be not so merry if Black manages to block our queenside with b3. Fortunately Bb1 puts all their hopes to an end as they are simply not in time. Then White will be having all the fun. [12.Bc2 b4

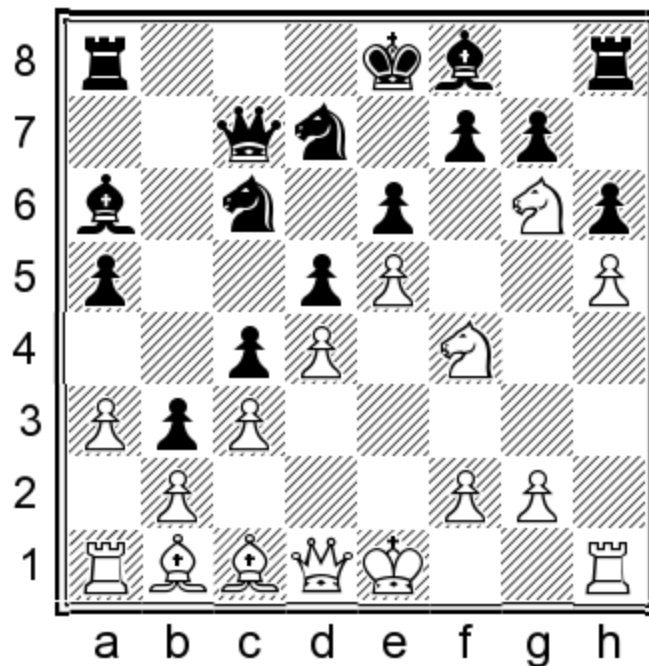
13.h5 b3 14.Bb1 Be7 White is essentially playing without a rook.]



*Position after: 12.Bb1*

**A1)** 12...b4 13.h5 Next on the agenda is getting the queen to g4. 13...b3 14.Nh4 Qc7 15.Nhg6! Or Qg4 first, but one cannot resist such a beautiful move.



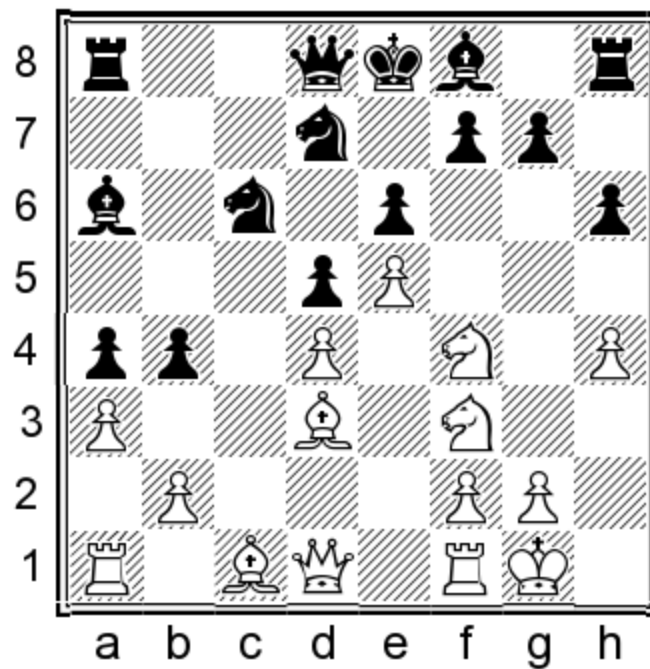


*Position after: 15.Nhg6!*

15...Rg8 [15...fxg6 16.Bxg6+ Ke7 17.Qg4 Nd8 18.Qh4+ Black has to return their extra material, but that leaves them with a positionally busted position and no compensation for it at all.] 16.Qg4 0-0-0 17.Nxe6! fxe6 18.Qxe6+- Black's rook is trapped and they should be happy if they make it past move 25.

**A2)** 12...Nb6 13.h5 Kd7 Black should escort their king away from the endangered kingside. 14.Nh4 Bc8 [14...Kc7 15.Nhg6! is quite a sweet move to play, the point being 15...fxg6 16.Nxe6++-. Therefore Black defends e6 first.] 15.Qg4 White will first improve their position with Nf3 and castling, then they can start thinking about improving the rest of their position and forcing through f4-f5. Note that because of the strong position of the queen on g4 Black cannot even develop their dark-squared bishop. White has the easier game by far.

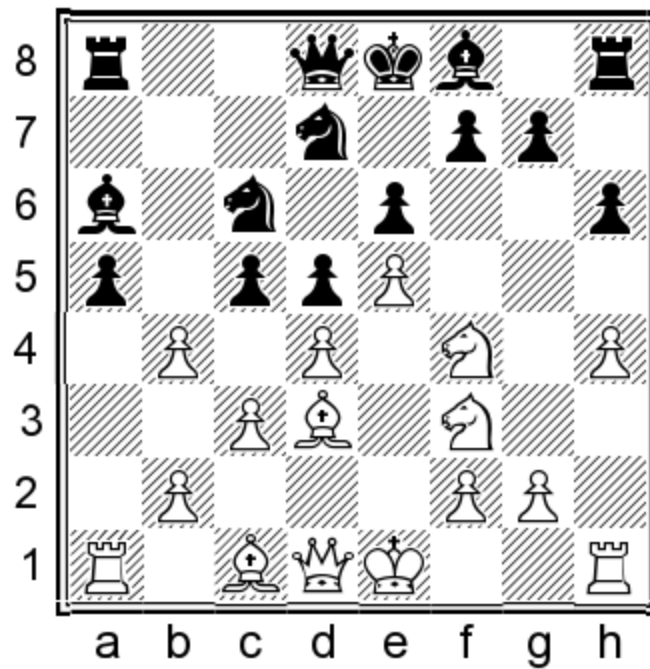
**B) 11...cxd4 12.cxd4 a4 13.0-0 b4**



*Position after: 13...b4*

With this move Black simply blunders a pawn. 14.Bxa6  
Rxa6 15.axb4 Bxb4 16.Rxa4±

**12.axb4**

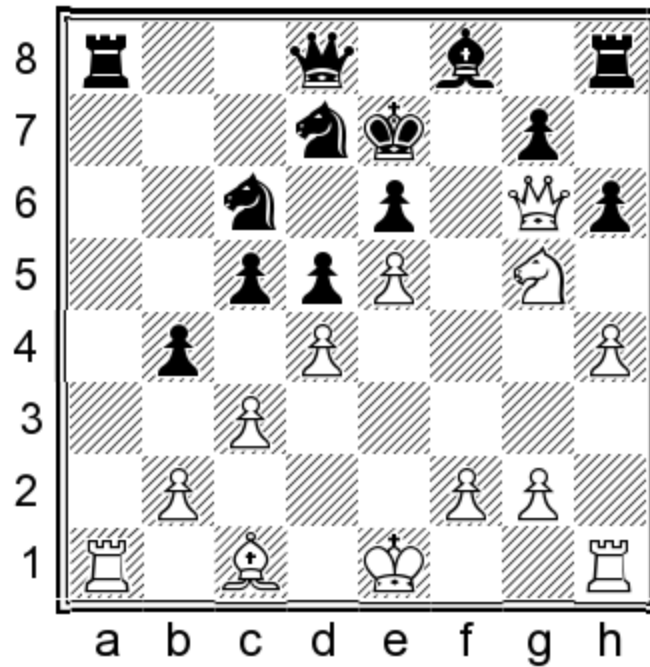


*Position after: 12.axb4*

Of course you can capture on a6 first, but why not give your opponent some room to go wrong?

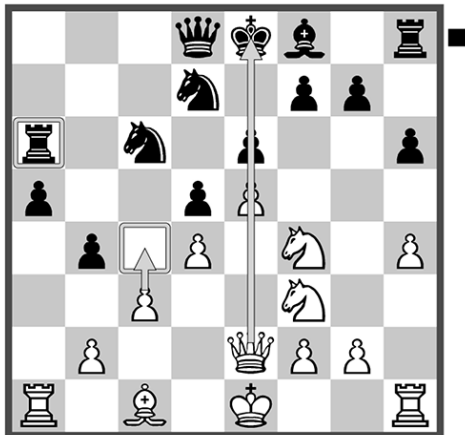
**12...cxb4**

12...Bxd3 13.Qxd3 axb4 14.Nxe6! fxe6 15.Qg6+ Ke7 16.Ng5



*Position after: 16.Ng5*

Black is being massacred and they cannot avoid fatal material losses. 16...hxc5 17.Bxc5+ Nf6 18.exf6+ gxf6 19.Rxa8 Qxa8 20.Qxf6+ Kd7 21.Qxh8+- 13.Bxa6 Rxa6 14.Qe2



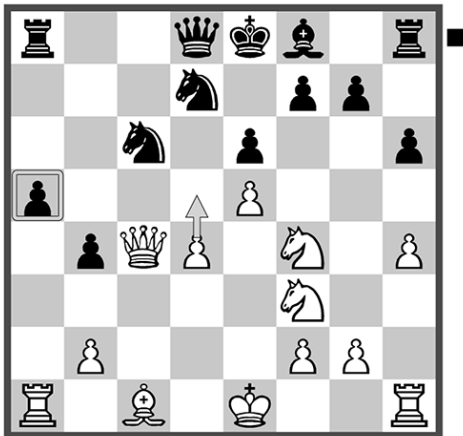
*Position after: 14.Qe2*

In this instance White is not well-positioned to play c3-c4 immediately, but they can easily prepare the pawn advance thanks to the oddly-positioned black rook.

### **14...Ra8**

14...Qa8 15.c4! dxc4 16.d5! exd5 17.Nxd5, with Qxc4 to follow, leaves White with a great advantage since their uncoordinated opponent is not ready for such a massive opening of the position.

### **15.c4 dxc4 16.Qxc4**

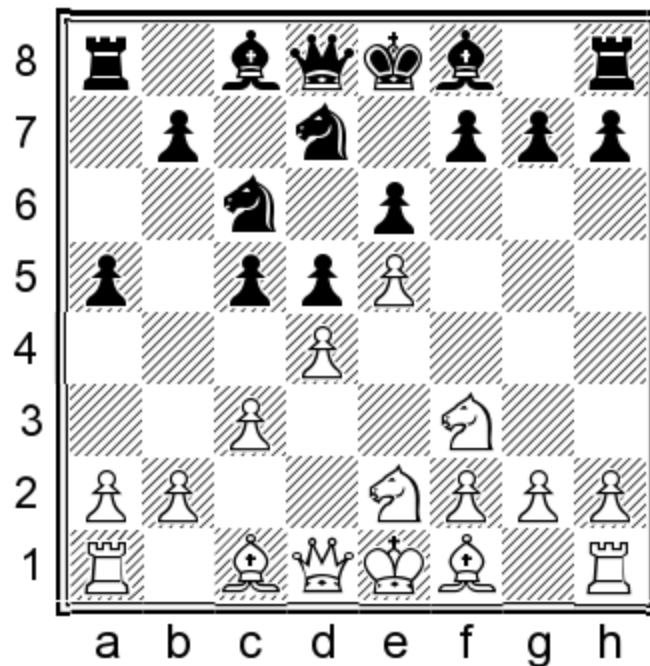


*Position after: 16.Qxc4*

White is definitely on top here. The d5-advance is in the air, Black has to constantly worry about their weak a5-pawn, and they still need at least two moves to get their king to safety.

**c) 7...a5!?**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 a5!?**



*Position after: 7...a5!?*

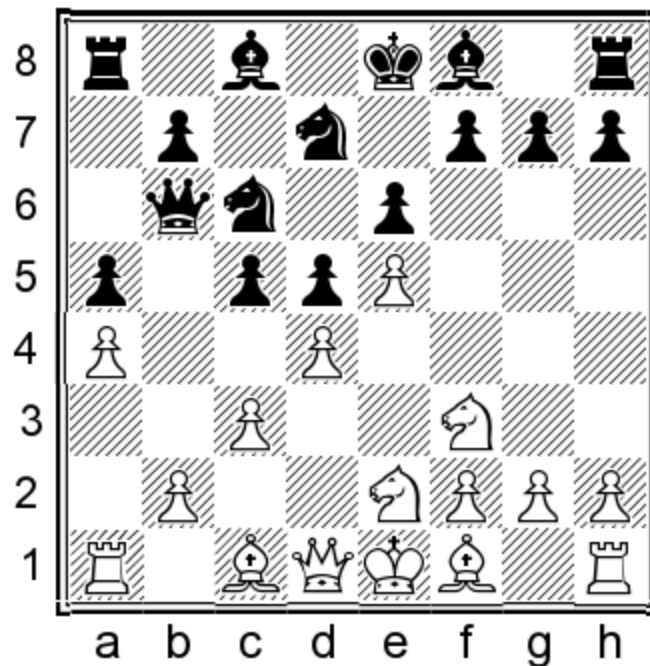
This is surprisingly quite annoying for White. Black grabs some space on the queenside and asks the first player to make a useful move too. Our favorite set-up with Nf4 does not work here.

### **8.a4!**

The main downside of Black's last move is that their options will be quite limited after a4. As there is no ...b5 available they will have to open the center with ...f6.

8.Nf4? runs into concrete problems after 8...cxd4 9.cxd4 Bb4+ 10.Bd2 g5! when White's center becomes incredibly shaky due to the g-pawn advance. It is a very good way for White to find themselves in a losing position very early on.

### **8...Qb6**



*Position after: 8...Qb6*

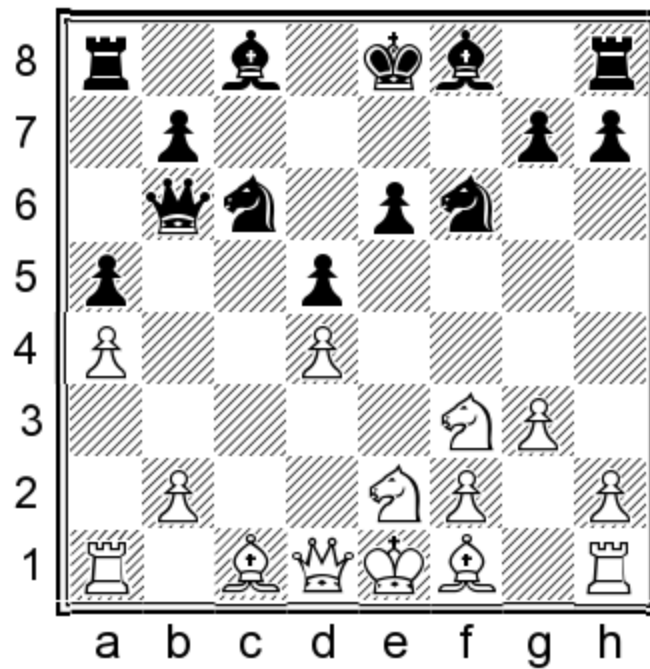
The immediate 8...cxd4 9.cxd4 f6 10.exf6 Nxf6 11.Nc3 gives White the extra option of developing their f1-bishop to d3, so Black once again plays a useful move and forces White to develop their light-squared bishop to g2 instead.

### **9.g3**

Since there is no other way of untangling White's pieces, we head towards fianchettoing which we've already seen in few instances. At the same time we are not obliged to play Bg2 and can switch back to Bd3 set-ups if Black allows us to do so.

Because Black's queen is exerting pressure on d4, White's e2-knight is obliged to defend it as 9.Nf4? cxd4 10.cxd4 Bb4+ 11.Bd2 Nxd4-+ is lost for White.

**9...cxd4 10.cxd4 f6 11.exf6 Nxf6**



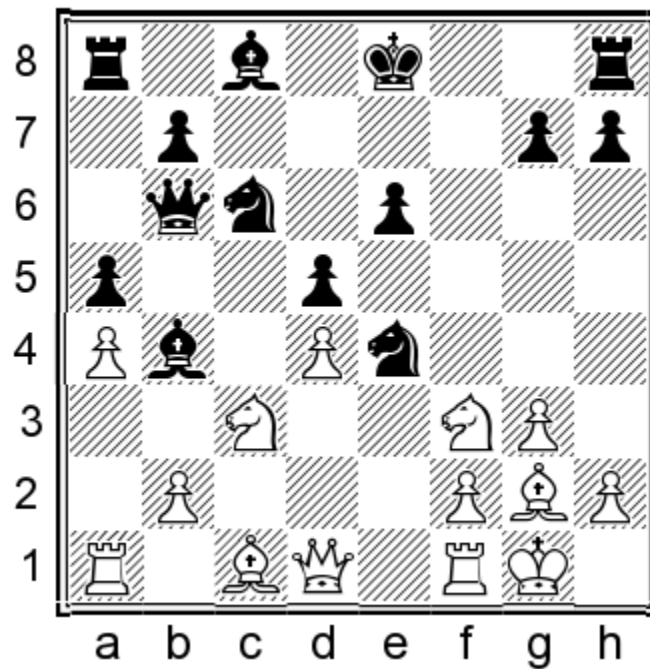
*Position after: 11...Nxf6*

## **12.Nc3**

If Black does not force matters we just continue our development with Bd3 (or Bg2) and then build our play around Black's weaknesses on the e-file.

I also examined the funky variation which goes 12.Bg2 Bb4+ 13.Nc3 Ne4 14.0-0.





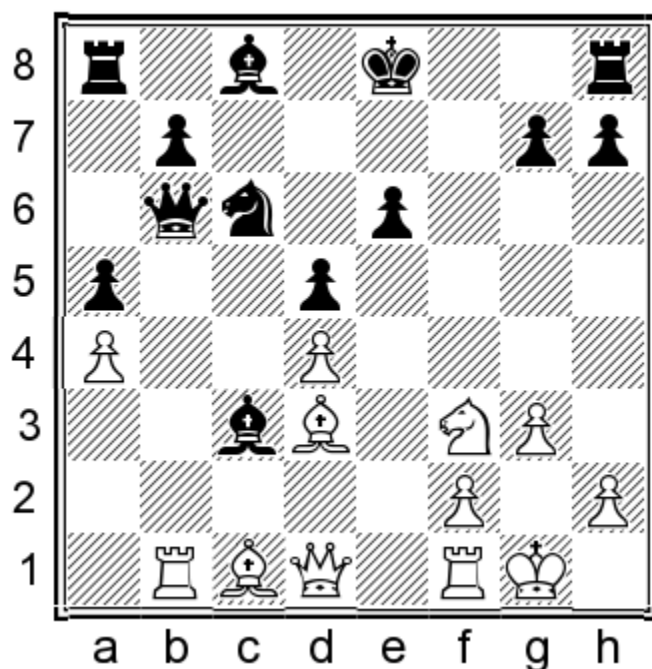
*Position after: 14.0-0*

White has compensation after 14...Nxc3 15.bxc3 Bxc3 16.Ra3 Bb4 17.Ng5! and is at least not worse, though I deem the whole thing rather unnecessary.

## **12...e5**

Here 12...Bb4 13.Bd3 keeps the e4-square more protected and the g3-move is actually quite handy anyway as it reinforces White's control over the f4-square. After 13...Ne4 14.0-0 Nxc3 15.bxc3 Bxc3 White has a much better

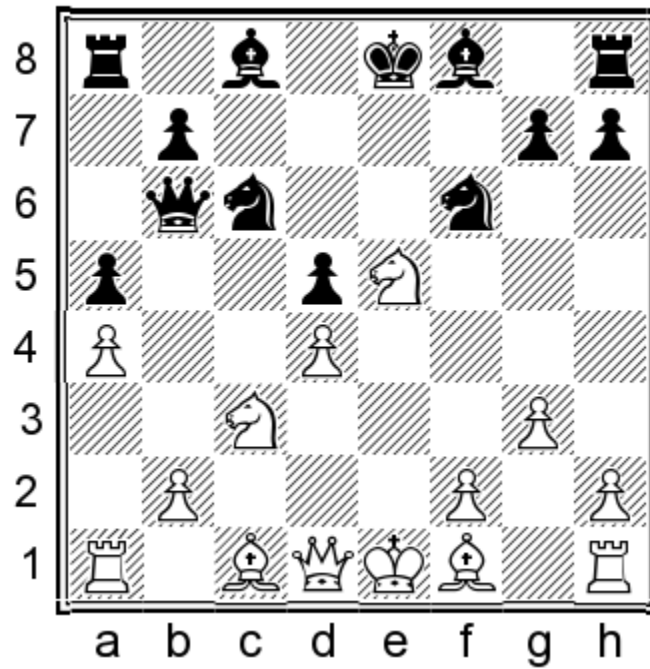
version of the 12.Bg2 line thanks to the strong 16.Rb1!,



*Position after: 16.Rb1!*

utilizing the fact that White's bishop is on d3 and not on g2. Black's position is collapsing after 16...Qc7 [or 16...Qd8 17.Ng5!+-] 17.Qc2!+- because White's pressure on the light squares is simply unbearable.

**13.Nxe5**

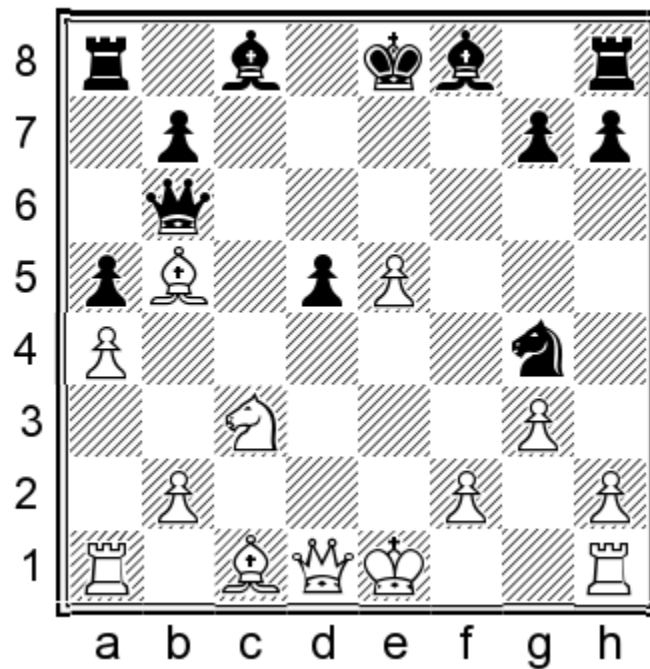


*Position after: 13.Nxe5*

**13...Bd6!?**

Quite a devilish idea.

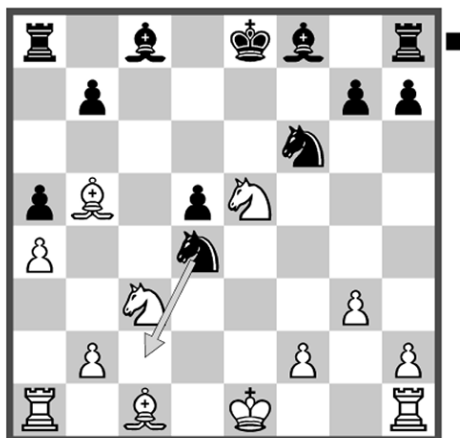
**A)** 13...Nxe5 14.dxe5 Ng4 is simply bad for Black. After the intermediate 15.Bb5+!



*Position after: 15.Bb5+!*

15...Kf7 [15...Bd7 loses the g4-knight but I am hesitant to call the move ...Bd7 a mistake as Black is lost anyway.  
16.Bxd7+ Kxd7 17.Qxg4++-] 16.0-0 Black's position is completely busted.

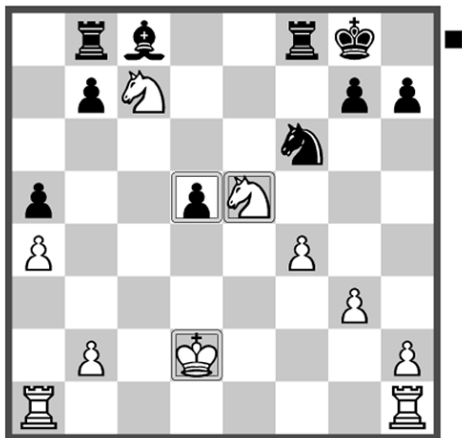
**B) 13...Qxd4 14.Qxd4 Nxd4 15.Bb5+!**



*Position after: 15.Bb5+!*

Black was threatening to fork our a1-rook with ...Nc2+ so we need to force the position a little bit more. White will have a slightly more pleasant endgame after 15...Nxb5 (otherwise White simply castles) 16.Nxb5 Bb4+ 17.Bd2 0-0

**B1)** 18.Nc7, forcing Black to make a decision regarding their b4-bishop, is a possibility. After 18...Bxd2+ 19.Kxd2 Rb8 20.f4<sup>2</sup>

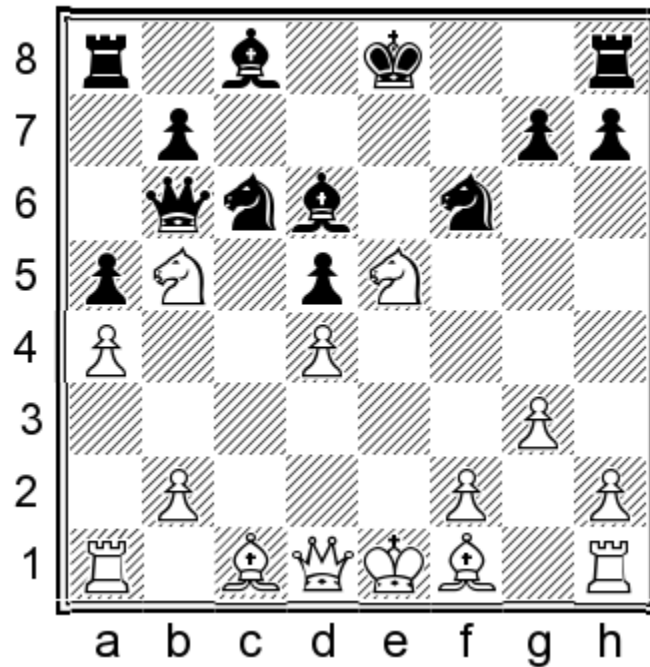


*Position after: 20.f4<sup>2</sup>*

White has a nice position. They have a strong outpost on e5 for their knight, their king is much more active in the center than its counterpart, and Black's d5-pawn might prove to be a weakness in the future.

**B2)** 18.Bxb4 axb4 19.0-0<sup>2</sup> We continue with Nd4 and strengthen the e5-knight with f4. With better pieces and a better pawn structure it is much easier to play the white side. [19.Nc7 is not so great for White after capturing on b4 because of 19...Ra5! when Black's rook is much more active than it was on b8.]

**14.Nb5**



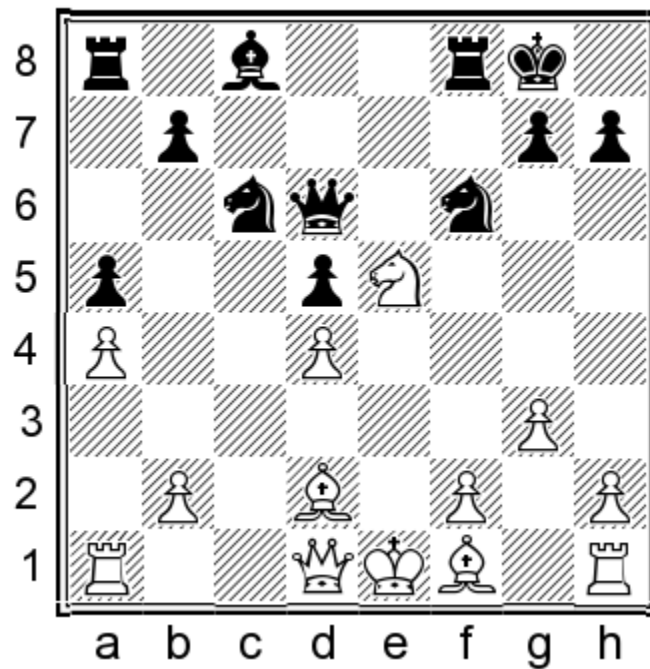
*Position after: 14.Nb5*

**14...0-0!**

Black is not really sacrificing the d6-bishop as they will recover it immediately with a little help of a queen check on b4 but, nevertheless, 14... 0-0! is aesthetic.

The simplistic 14...Nxe5?! can hardly be the point as 15.Nxd6+ Qxd6 16.dxe5 Qxe5+ 17.Qe2<sup>2</sup> gives White a clear advantage in the endgame.

**15.Nxd6 Qb4+ 16.Bd2 Qxd6**

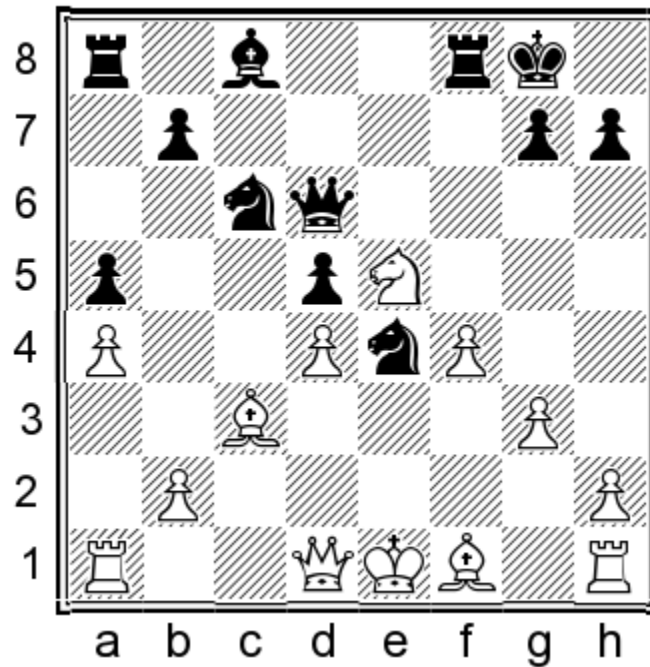


*Position after: 16...Qxd6*

**17.Bc3!**

White needs to be rather careful as 17.Be3 is met by 17...Ng4! 18.Nxg4 Bxg4 19.Qxg4 Qb4+,, with great play for Black.

**17...Ne4 18.f4!**



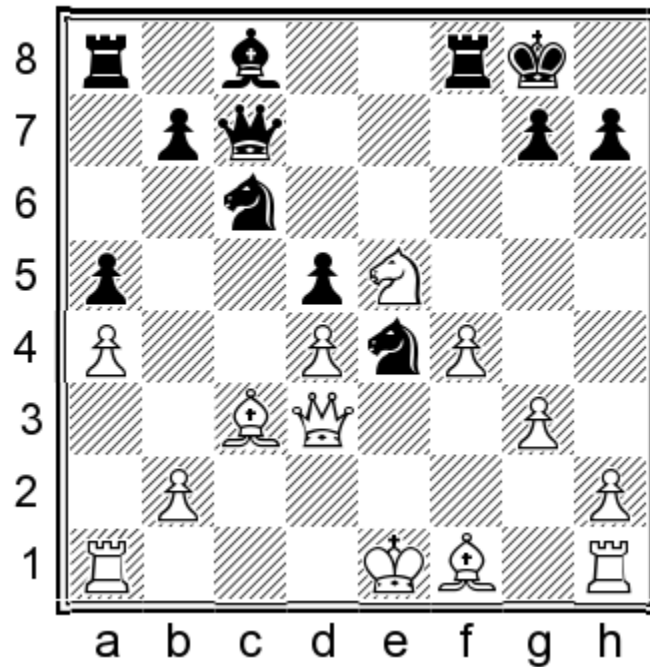
*Position after: 18.f4!*

Reinforcing the e5-outpost as much as possible! Black has multiple options here but the bottom line is they always fall a little short of full equality. A pawn is a pawn, after all.

### **18...Qe7**

**A)** 18...Qc7 indirectly threatens to capture the c3-pawn, and the correct way to counter it is 19.Qd3!.

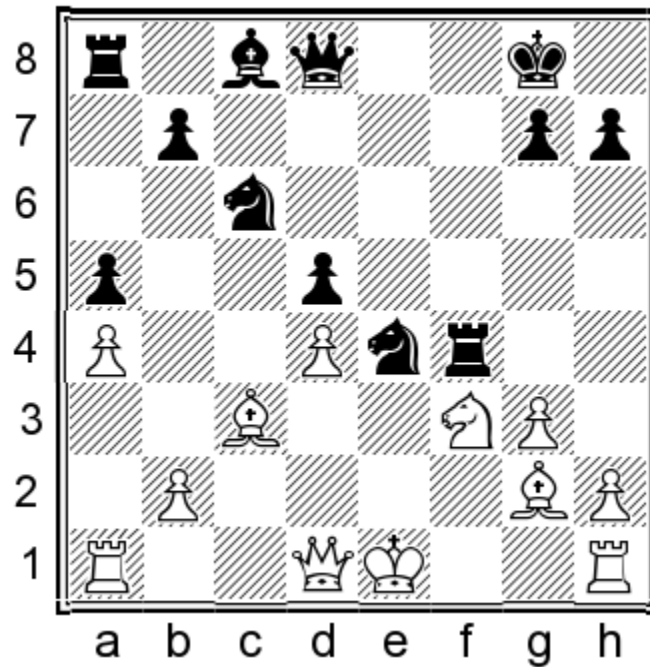




*Position after: 19.Qd3!*

The tactical point is that after 19...Bf5 White can afford to sacrifice an exchange with 20.Bg2! Nf2 21.Bxd5+ Kh8 22.Qc4 Nxf1 23.Bxf1± with more than enough compensation. Two pawns are sufficient compensation even from a purely materialistic point of view, and we need to take into account White's bishop pair in as well.

**B)** 18...Qd8 is not as stupid as it looks at first sight - Black's idea is to strike with 19.Bg2 Rxf4! where their f4-rook is taboo. White's keeps the upper hand with calm defense though. 20.Nf3!

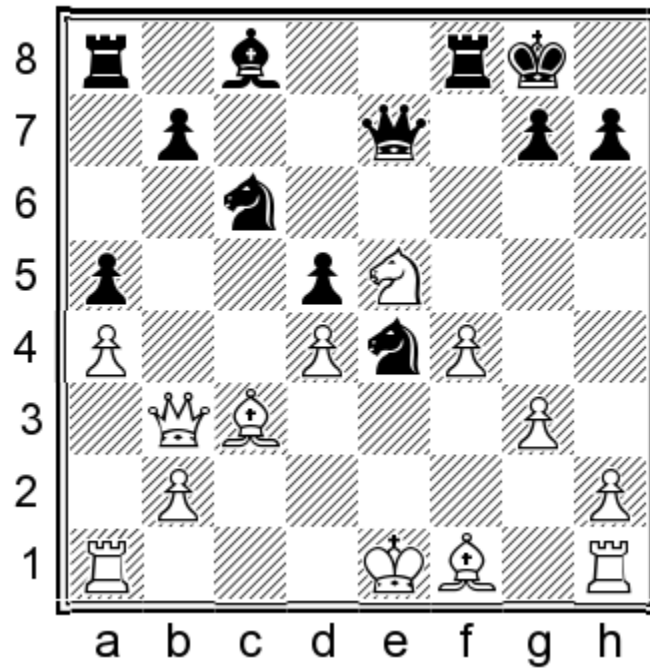


*Position after: 20.Nf3!*

20...Rf7 [Reinforcing White's pawn structure with 20...Nxc3 21.bxc3 Qe8+ 22.Kf2 Rf6 23.Re1 Qh5 24.h3!<sup>2</sup> is rather unwise.] 21.0-0 Be6 22.Qe2 Qd7 23.Nd2<sup>2</sup> As shown in the previous note, Black should hardly wish to strengthen White's pawn chain with ...Nxc3. But after the knight retreats from e4, White's bishop pair should secure them a stable edge.

Since ...Rxf4 is now a very unpleasant threat, it is time to dive into complications for a couple more moves.

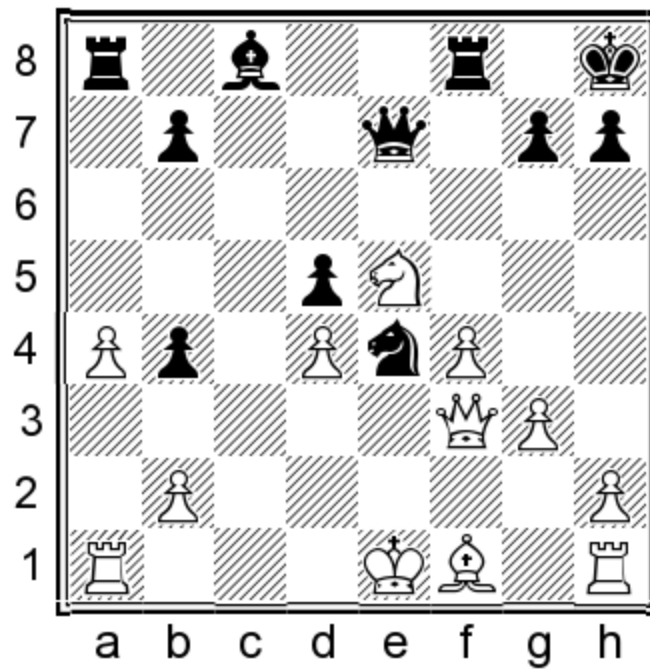
**19.Qb3!**



*Position after: 19.Qb3!*

**19...Nxe5**

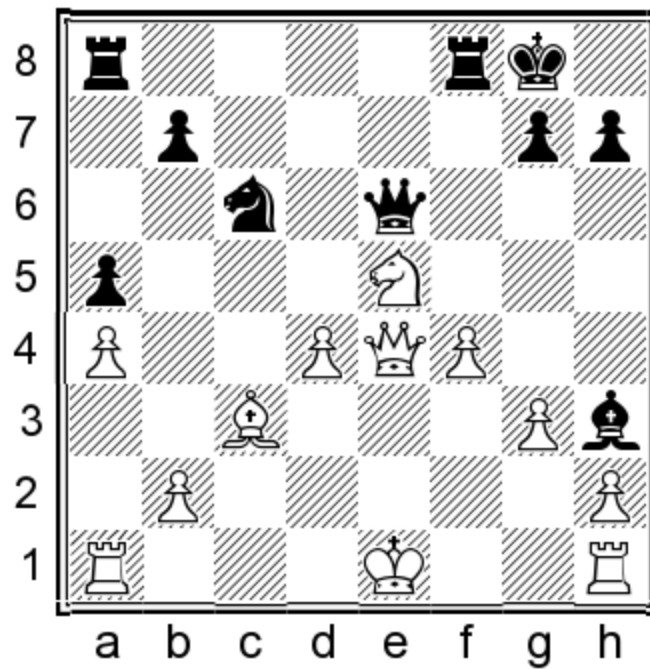
**A)** 19...Kh8 allows White to calm things down with 20.Qa3!, for example 20...Nb4 21.Bxb4 axb4 22.Qf3.



*Position after: 22.Qf3*

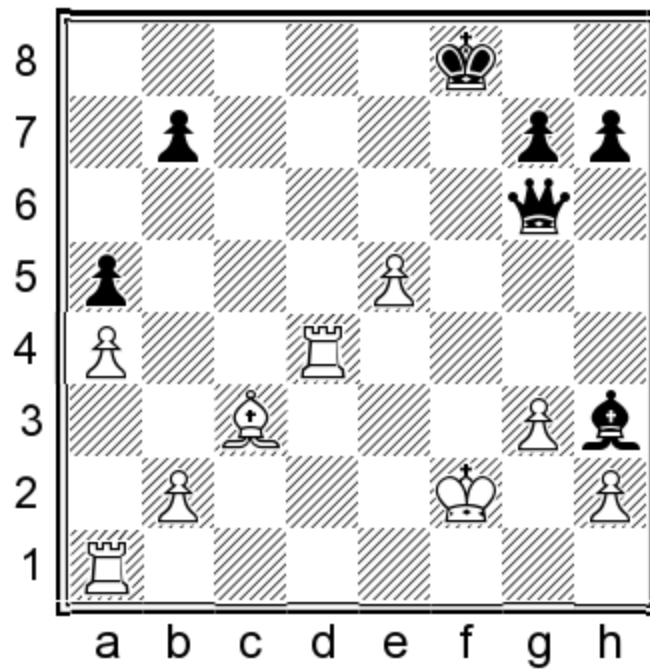
If Black wishes to keep their initiative, they need to give up another pawn with 22...b3 23.Qxb3 but that can hardly keep White from finishing their development for long. 23...g5 24.Bg2 gxf4 25.Qa3 Qg7 26.0-0<sup>2</sup>, intending to recapture on f4, gives White an advantage.

**B)** 19...Be6 20.Bh3! Bxh3 21.Qxd5+ Qe6 22.Qxe4



*Position after: 22.Qxe4*

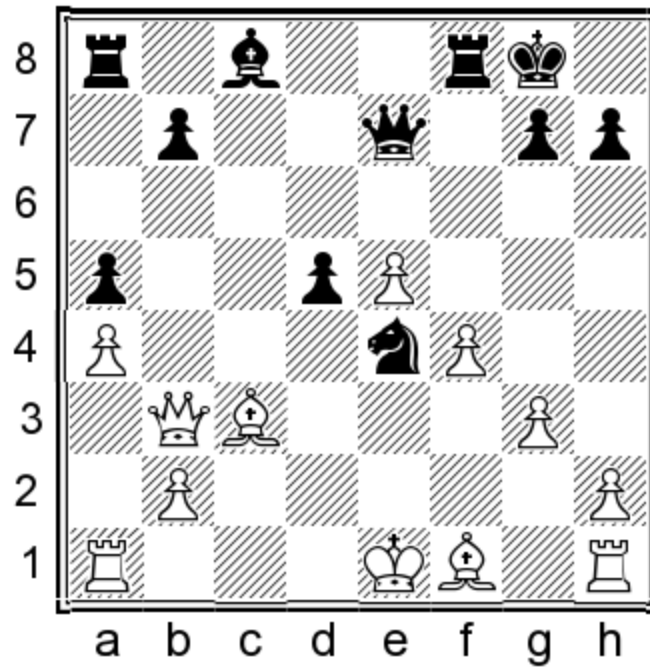
is a sweet trick. While it is true Black has some compensation on the light squares after 22...Nxe5 23.dxe5 Rad8, I would definitely rather take White's side than fishing for compensation two pawns down. Let us explore a bit further: 24.Kf2 Qb6+ 25.Qe3 Qg6 26.Rhd1 Rxf4+ 27.Qxf4 Rf8 28.Qxf8+ Kxf8 29.Rd4<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 29.Rd4<sup>2</sup>*

While Black might be able to hold in these lines with a lot of precision, humans rarely show computer precision in over the board games. It is much more practical to play such positions with White, keeping the material since Black's compensation might evaporate for good after a single imprecision.

**20.dxe5**



*Position after: 20.dxe5*

## **20...Qc5**

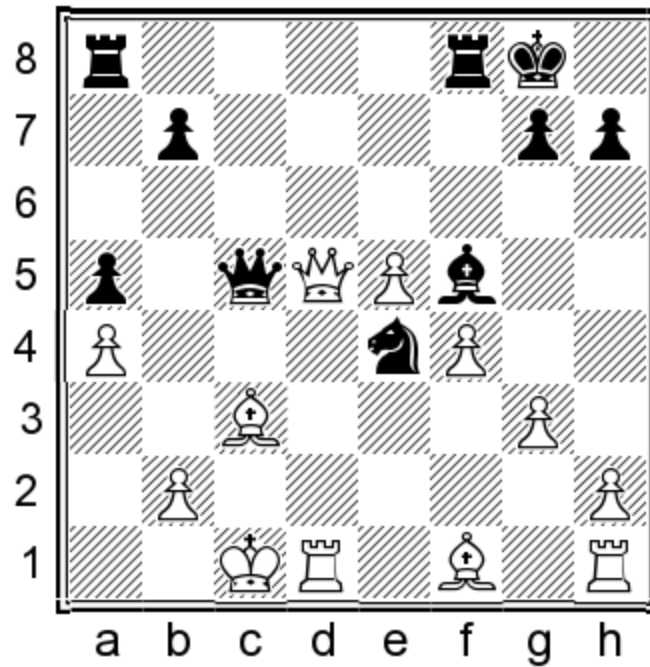
It looks as if Black has managed to generate enough counterplay here but White has one more ace up their sleeve.

20...Be6 21.Bh3 transposes to the above.

## **21.0-0-0 Bf5**

21...Bg4 22.Qxd5+ Qxd5 23.Rxd5 Nxc3 24.bxc3 Bf3 25.Bc4 ultimately leads to the same thing.

## **22.Qxd5+!**

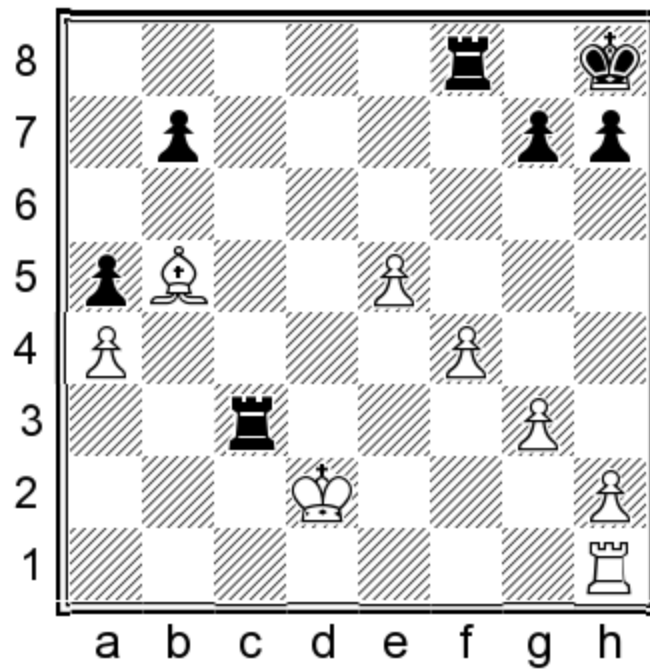


*Position after: 22.Qxd5+!*

Eventually it will turn out Black is not out of the woods even after they gain a material advantage!

**22...Qxd5 23.Rxd5 Nxc3 24.bxc3 Be4 25.Bc4 Bxh1 26.Rd1+ Kh8 27.Rxh1 Rac8 28.Bb5 Rxc3+ 29.Kd2<sup>2</sup>**



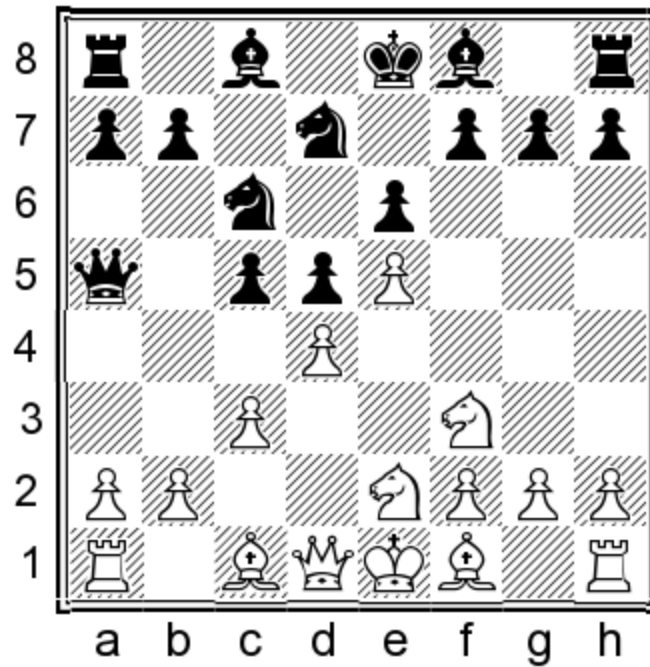


*Position after: 29.Kd2*

The dust has settled and Black finds themselves in a difficult position once again. While it is true White has only a pawn for the sacrificed exchange, Black's b-pawn will hardly ever advance. At the same time the e & f-pawn duo will be, together with White's tremendously active pieces, very dangerous.

**d) 7...Qa5**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 Qa5**



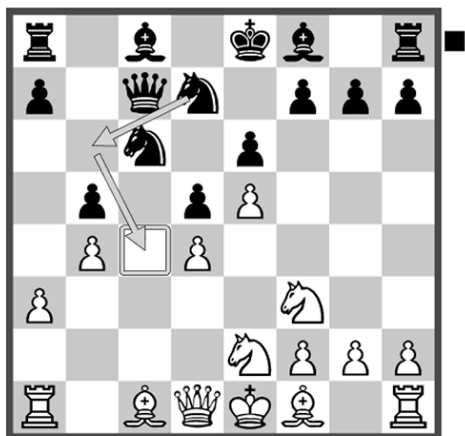
*Position after: 7...Qa5*

The queen comes to a5 in order to destabilize White's center with ...cxd4. As White cannot recapture with their c-pawn due to the a5-e1 pin, there could be problems as the e5-pawn might become weak.

## 8.Bf4!

I was quite happy to find this interesting option for White. White is strengthening the center, anticipating both taking on d4 and the ...f7-f6 push from Black.

**A)** 8.a3 cxd4 9.b4 Qc7 Unfortunately White is a bit overextended in this position. [The sacrifice 9...Qb6 10.cxd4 a5 11.b5! Qxb5 12.Nc3 is a useful motif to be aware of.] 10.cxd4 b5!



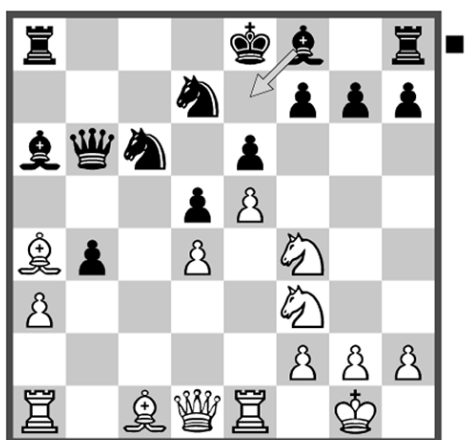
*Position after: 10...b5!*

White left the c4-square unattended and Black is readily relocating their knight there.

**A1)** 11.Nf4, hitting b5, should be met calmly.

**A1.1)** 11...Qb6 Unfortunately White's structure will be attacked from the side. 12.Be2 a5 with a lot of play for Black.

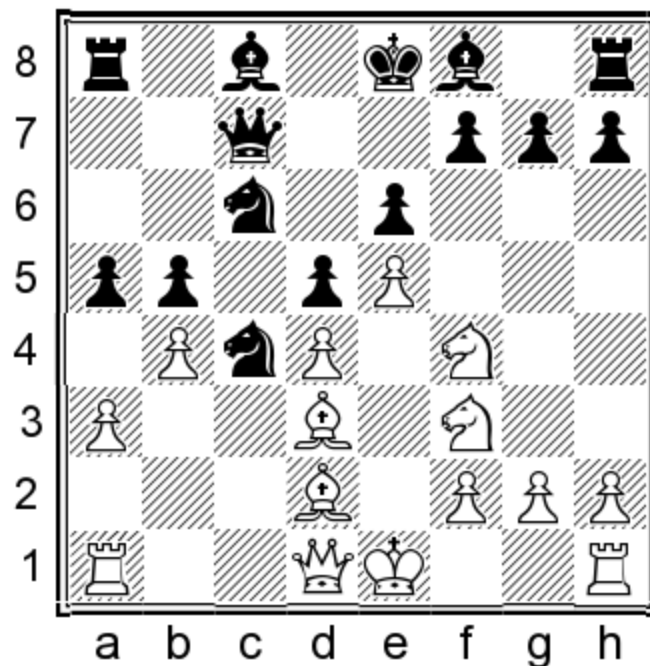
**A1.2)** 11...a5 is also not so simple to deal with. 12.Bxb5 axb4 13.0-0 Qb6 14.Ba4 Ba6 15.Re1



*Position after: 15.Re1*

It would be lovely if Black had to accept our bait on a3, but they should play the safer ...Be7 here. 15...bxa3? 16.Nxd5! and White simply blasts through. 16...exd5 17.e6 Nf6 [17...fxe6?? 18.Rxe6+ wins the knight on c6.] 18.Bxc6+ Qxc6 19.exf7+ Of course the pawn becomes a monster on f7 now, but it was taboo due to the knight fork on e5. 19...Kd8 20.Ne5+- The attacker will pick up another pawn on a3 and there is only so much resistance one can put up with a king on d8.

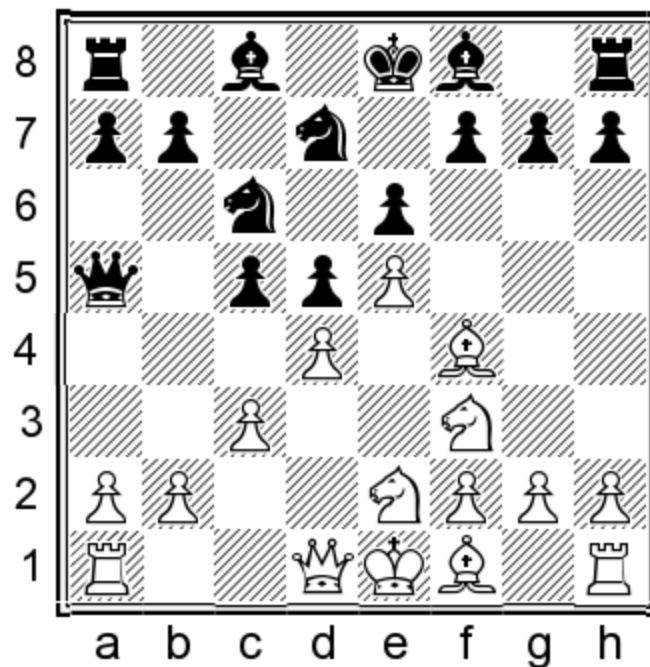
**A2)** 11.Bd2 Nb6 12.Nf4 Nc4 13.Bd3 a5



*Position after: 13...a5*

Black's play is too smooth to my taste. 14.0-0 axb4 15.axb4 Rxa1 16.Qxa1 Nxd2 17.Nxd2 Bxb4 It will still take some work to restore the material balance for White and in the meantime Black will successfully finish their development with castling.

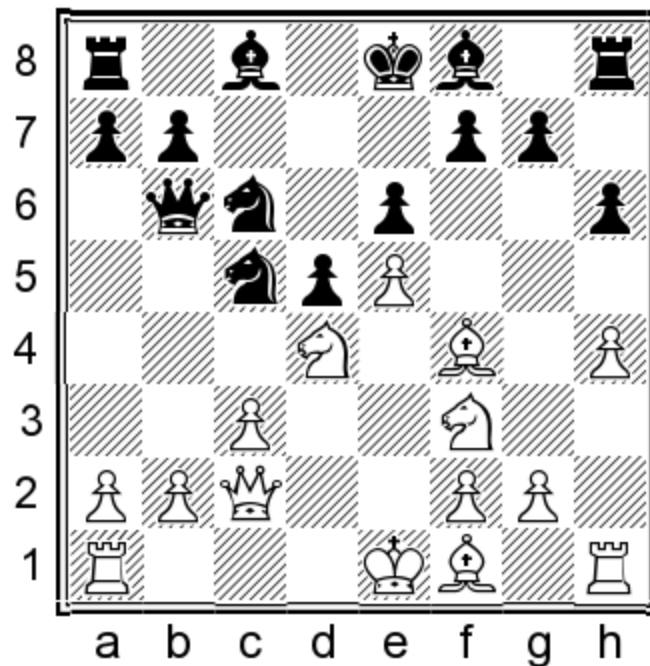
**B)** 8.Bd2 is another bishop move aspiring to keep things under control but it fails miserably after 8...Qb6 9.Rb1 f6! when it's clear the white bishop would be much better placed on f4 instead.



*Position after: 8.Bf4!*

### **8...Be7**

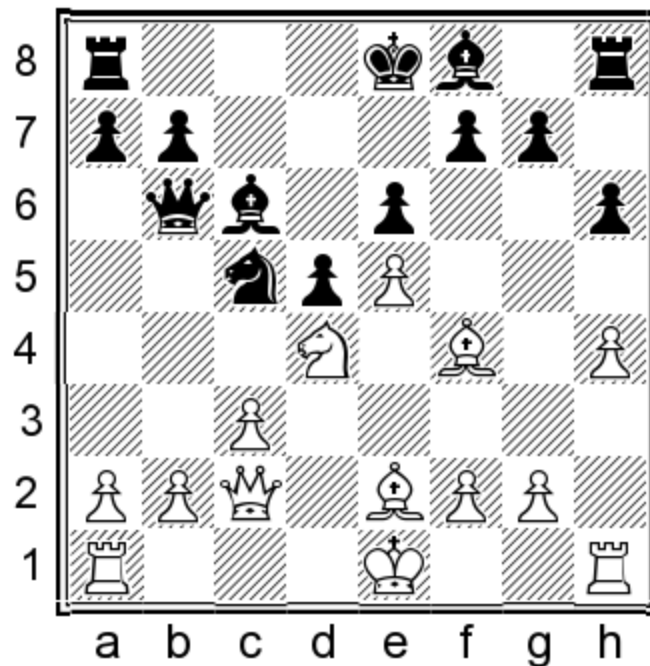
**A)** 8...cxd4 9.Nexd4 The positions with the queen's knight on d4 are quite a fresh sight in comparison with the standard knight placement of Nc3, Nf3. White has easy development and keeps a firm grip on d4. 9...h6 10.h4 It is useful to take some space on the kingside anyway but this move mainly stops any attempts to create a mess with ...g5-g4. 10...Qb6 11.Qc2 Nc5



*Position after: 11...Nc5*

**A1)** We reach a similar position to the mainline, where White's a-pawn is already on a3, and White can successfully harass the c5-knight with b2-b4. However, 12.b4? does not work so well here, most notably due to 12...Ne4 13.Bd3 Bxb4! 14.cxb4 Nxd4μ.

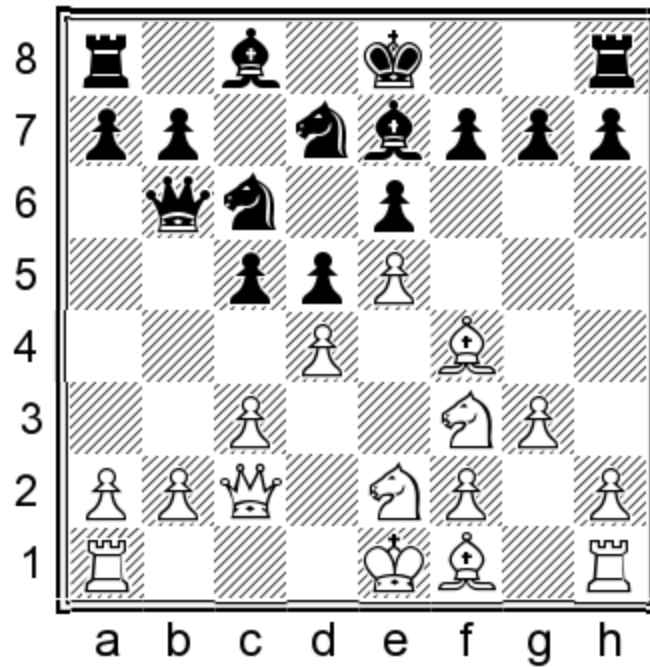
**A2)** 12.Be2 Bd7 13.Nxc6 White was waiting until their opponent's light-squared bishop left its home on c8. In the case of Black recapturing with a pawn it would no longer be possible to swap the bishop off with ...Ba6. 13...Bxc6 14.Nd4



*Position after: 14.Nd4*

White has more space and their piece placement looks natural. On the other hand Black's setup on the queenside looks a bit pointless and it is not so clear what they should focus on. 14...Be7 It should be quite interesting to play this position for White. They can try to gain space on the queenside with a2-a4, and if Black castles kingside there will also be the h6-weakness. Even the innocent-looking 15.0-0 is quite poisonous as Black cannot carelessly accept the Greek gift with 15...Bxh4? because of 16.Be3 Qc7 (the threat was b2-b4) 17.Nxc6 Qxc6 18.Bxc5 Qxc5 19.Qa4++-, picking up the wayward bishop.

**B)** 8...Qb6 The dancing queen finds a new target on b2 but we just protect it with Qc2 and continue developing our kingside with g3 and Bg2/d3, depending on the circumstances. 9.Qc2 Be7 10.g3

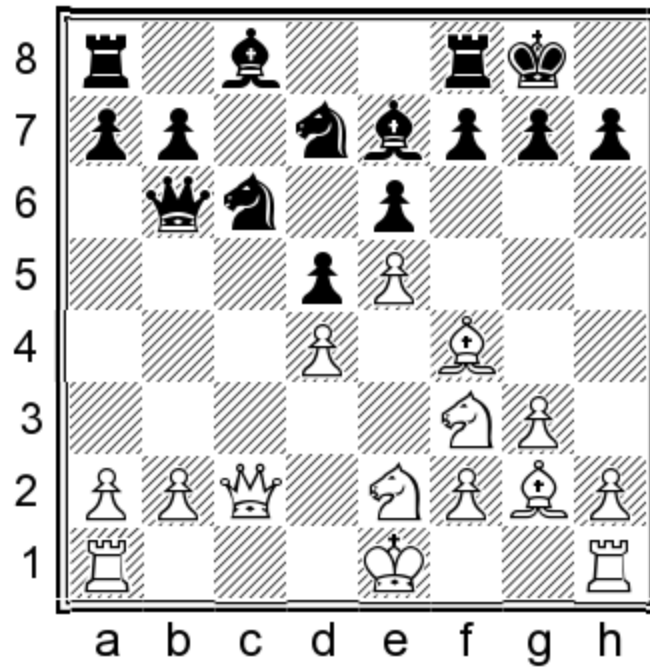


*Position after: 10.g3*

**B1)** 10...cxd4 11.Nexd4! In similar situations we preferred the move Nexd4 over the move cxd4 as Black's task of getting counterplay is much harder here. They cannot really play ...f6 as the e6-pawn is hanging. Here we develop the bishop to the natural d3-square after 11...0-0 12.Bd3<sup>2</sup>.

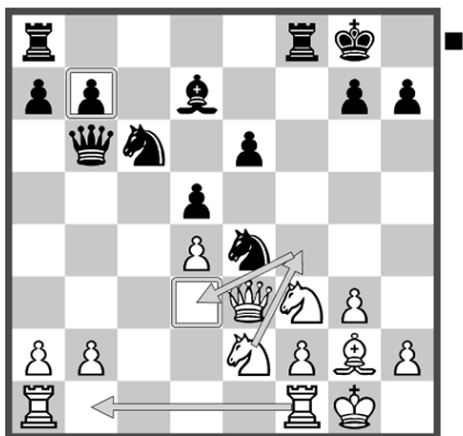
**B2)** 10...0-0 11.Bg2 cxd4 12.cxd4





*Position after: 12.cxd4*

With the bishop already on g2 the Nxd4-move wouldn't be so great, and therefore only the pawn recapture gives us chances to fight for an opening edge. 12...Bb4+ 13.Bd2 f6!? The only way of destabilizing the position. If White manages to castle peacefully then they would definitely have the upper hand. 14.exf6 Nxf6 15.0-0 Bxd2 16.Qxd2 Ne4 17.Qd3! Ideally we'd like to play Nf4-d3 and target the e5-square but we need to keep an eye on our b2-pawn's safety too. 17...Bd7 [17...Qxb2? is impossible due to 18.Rfb1+-, trapping the queen.] 18.Qe3!

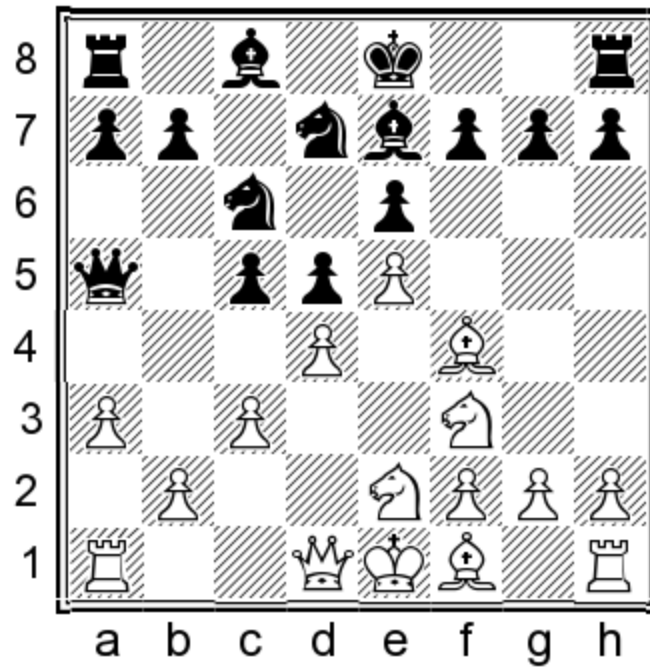


*Position after: 18.Qe3!*

This strange queen triangulation definitely deserves an explanation. We need the d3-square for our e2-knight and Qe3 was bad on the previous move as the b2-pawn was hanging. Truth be told b2 is still unprotected but with the bishop now on d7 we can capture the b7-pawn in exchange for our b2-pawn after [18.Nf4 g5! forces the knight to return to e2 as the d3-square is occupied by White's queen.] 18...Qxb2 [18...Rae8 19.Nf4! With the d3-square vacant we no longer fear the ...g5 push and so we can move our knight forward. Black will be under pressure after 19...Ne7 20.Bh3<sup>2</sup> with Ne5 to follow as the e6-pawn is a clear target.] 19.Rfb1 Qc2 20.Rxb7±.

### 9.a3

We can change the pawn structure ourselves with 9.dxc5 Qxc5 10.Ned4 Qb6 but this position should be compared with the main line where we get the extra move a2-a3 for free.



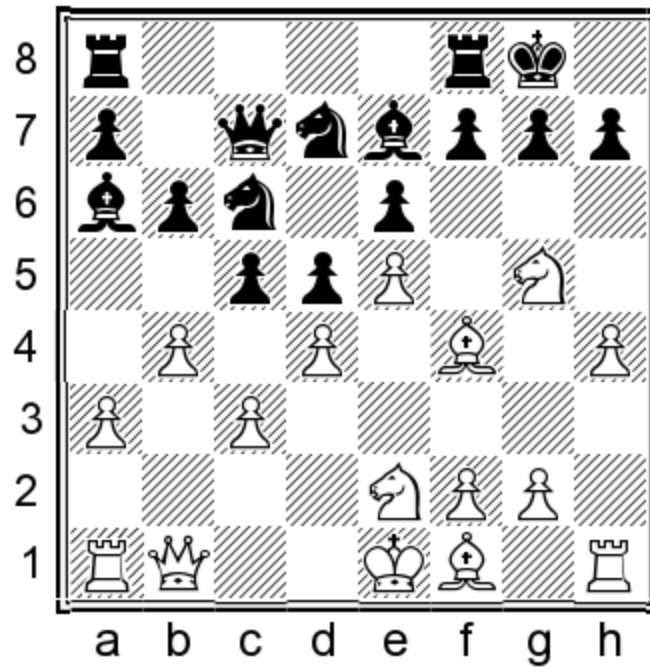
*Position after: 9.a3*

### **9...cxd4**

Black doesn't want to allow White to execute his plan so smoothly as in 9...0-0 10.b4 Qc7 11.h4! b6 [Stopping the knight from coming to g5 is not really a great idea since after 11...h6 12.Qd2 Re8 13.Ng3 White's attack plays itself. After Nh5 and Rh3-g3 there is no way Black can survive the onslaught.] 12.Ng5

**A)** 12...h6? is bad once again due to 13.Qd3 hxg5 [13...g6 14.Qh3 h5 15.g4 will also soon be over.] 14.hxg5 g6 15.Qh3+-.

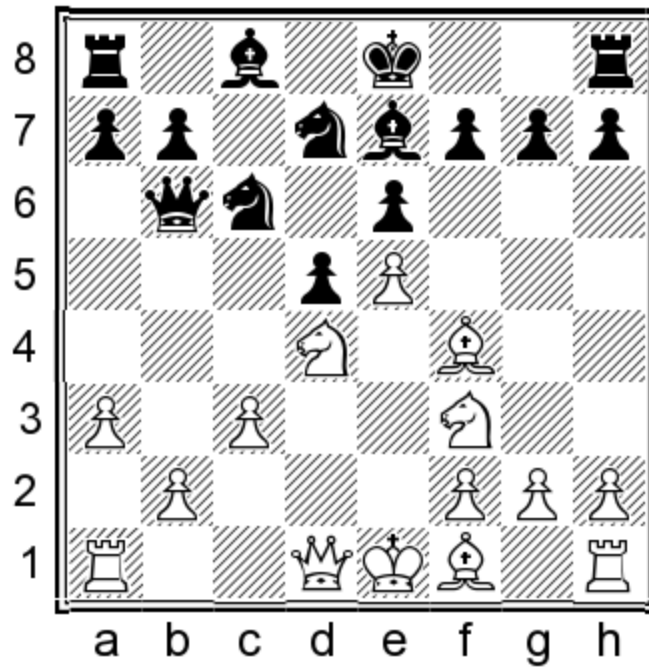
**B)** 12...Ba6 13.Qb1!



*Position after: 13.Qb1!*

A double attack threatening both Qxh7 and b4-b5 at once. It is true that Black can muddy the waters with 13...g6 14.b5 Bxb5 15.Qxb5 cxd4, but White can ignore the computerish defense and just continue with their attack. 16.h5, [16.cxd4? Nxd4 17.Nxd4 Qc3+-+ is the nasty trick we should keep in mind.]

**10.Nexd4 Qb6**



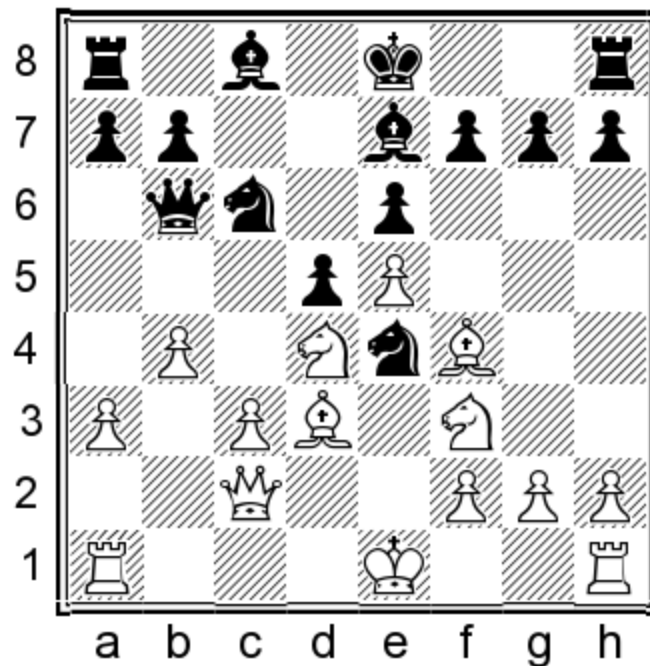
*Position after: 10...Qb6*

Once again we enter a Nexd4 position similar to the one discussed previously in the 8...cxd4 line, but this time we can even try to capitalize on the extra a3 move we got for free.

### **11.Qc2!?**

Our plan from the aforementioned line consisted of playing Qc2, Be2, and h4. We could also cover the b2-pawn with the a1-rook and decide the d1-queen's fate later, but with this move we aim to discourage 11...Nc5 due to

**12.b4! Ne4 13.Bd3±**



*Position after: 13.Bd3±*

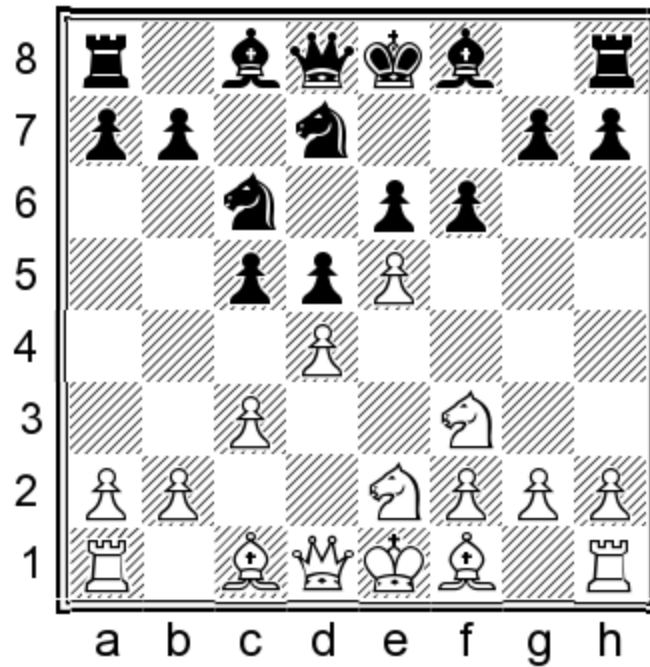
Here, Black's e4-knight is in hot water. Had the a-pawn still been on a2, White would have problems holding his queenside together as Black would have all sorts of tricks based on the weakness of the b4-square.

**e) 7...f6?**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3**

The immediate

**7...f6?**



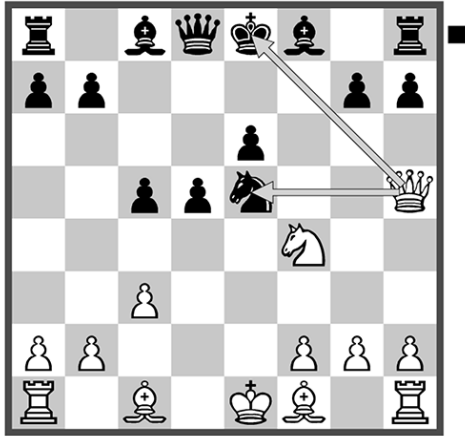
*Position after: 7...f6?*

does not work so well without the moves ...cxd4, cxd4 included and White has a nice tactical sequence here.

**8.Nf4 Ndx e5 9.dxe5 fxe5 10.Nxe5!**

Without the c-pawns present Black would be able sabotage our combination with a bishop check on b4, but with the a5-e1 diagonal blocked everything works smoothly for us.

**10...Nxe5 11.Qh5+**



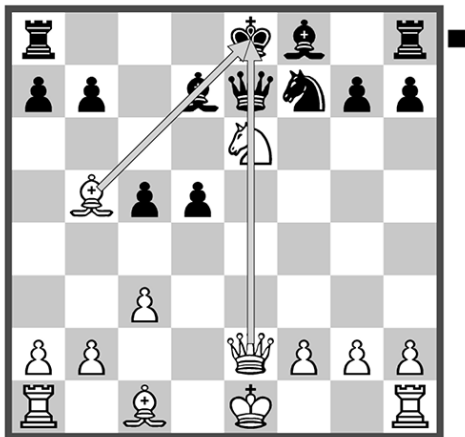
*Position after: 11.Qh5+*

Thanks to the hanging e5-knight there is only one move for Black here.

**11...Nf7**

11...Ng6? 12.Nxg6+- loses material due to the h8-rook being pinned.

**12.Bb5+ Bd7 13.Nxe6! Qe7 14.Qe2!+-**



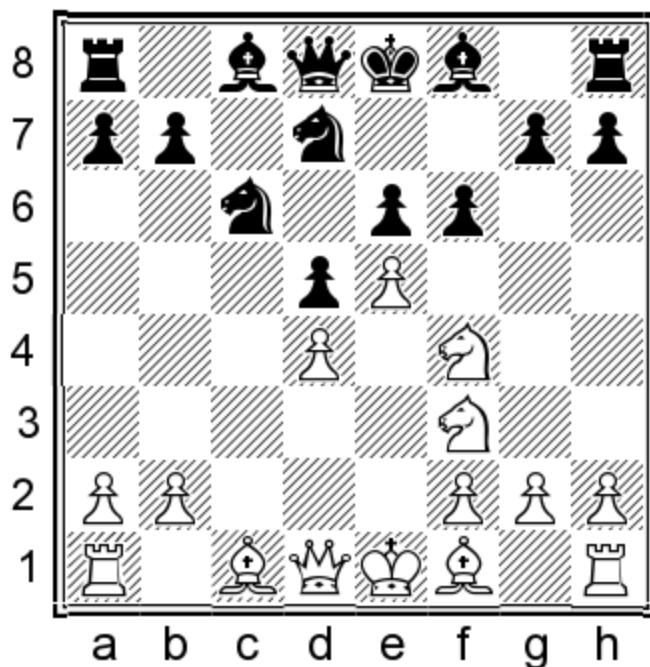
*Position after: 14.Qe2!+- White was able to recapture all their sacrificed material and Black is in a desperate situation now as their pieces are incredibly stuck. The*



*attacker will quickly castle and then finish off the defender's centralized king very swiftly.*

**f) 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 f6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 cxd4 8.cxd4 f6 9.Nf4!**

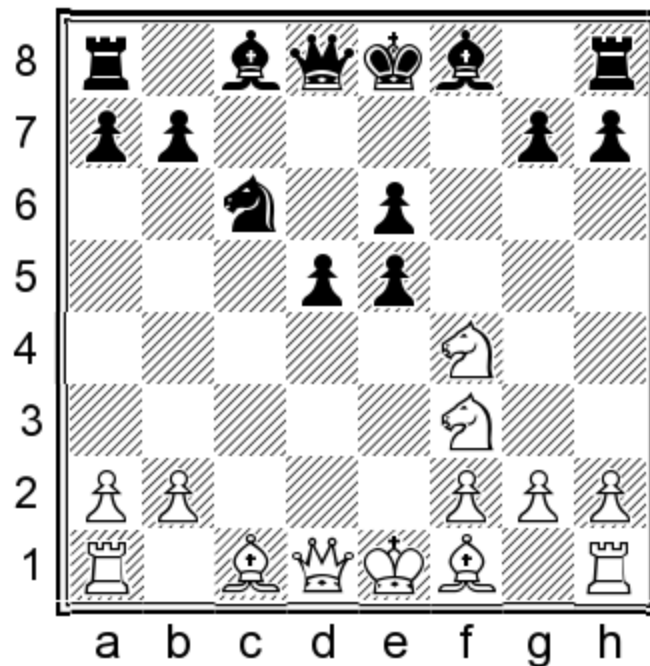


*Position after: 9.Nf4!*

This is the principled response, hitting the weak e6-pawn. We will have to enter complications but at the end of the day we should always be able to steer the game towards some favorable endgame.

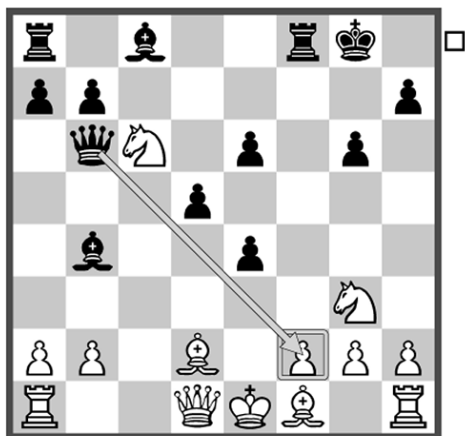
**9...Bb4+**

**9...Ndx e5 10.dxe5 fxe5**



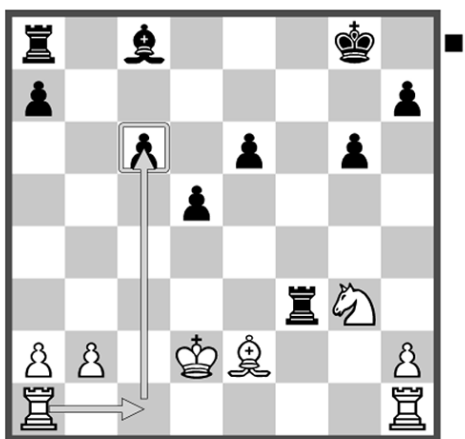
*Position after: 10...fxe5*

works much better for Black here than it did without the inclusion of ...cxd4, cxd4. However, it still doesn't work well enough. 11.Nh5 [11.Nxe5 was the trick that brought us success with the c-pawns still present on the board but now it wouldn't be clear after the intermediate 11...Bb4+!.] 11...g6 12.Ng3 e4 13.Nd4 Slow play is good for White who has the material advantage but even the concrete play doesn't promise Black full equality. 13...Bb4+ 14.Bd2 Qb6 15.Nxc6 0-0!



*Position after: 15...0-0!*

Still extremely tricky. Black is temporarily two pieces down but they are threatening mate in one! 16.f3 bxc6 17.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 18.Qd2 Finally there is nothing better for Black than to accept the queen exchange and try their luck in the endgame. They will get a third pawn for their piece in return for the queen exchange, but the compensation after 18...Qxd2+ 19.Kxd2 exf3 20.gxf3 Rxf3 21.Be2<sup>2</sup>

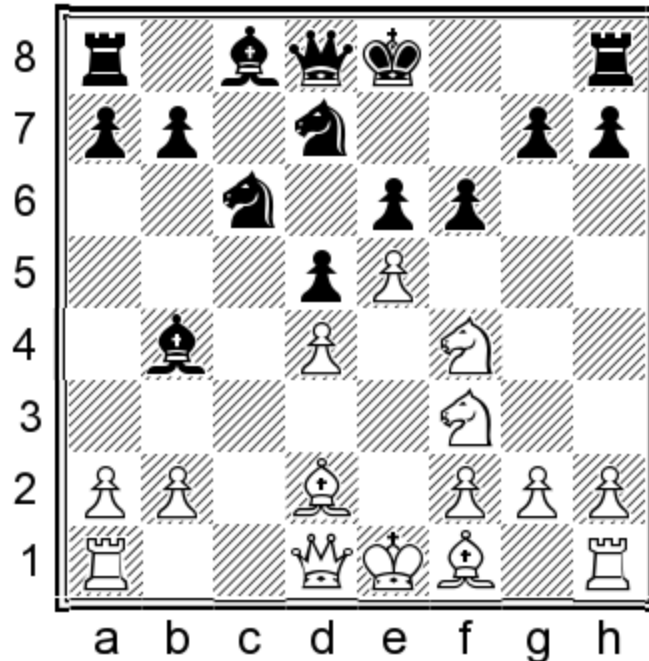


*Position after: 21.Be2<sup>2</sup>*

still does not look fully sufficient. White will start mounting pressure against Black's pawn formation with Rac1. It is

always quite a different story when your pawns are being blocked by the opponent's pieces instead of advancing forward.

## 10.Bd2



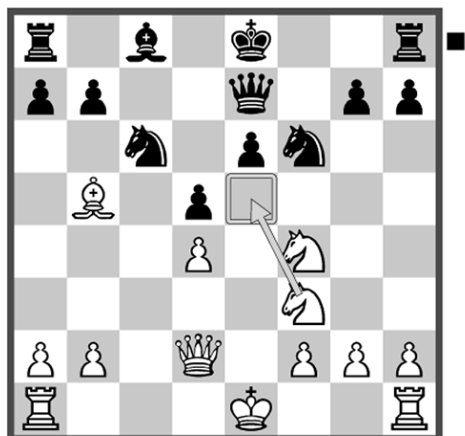
*Position after: 10.Bd2*

Exchanging the dark-squared bishop is, as always, positionally risky for Black as its light-squared colleague on c8 can find itself being very passive behind Black's pawn formation.

## 10...Qe7

10...Bxd2+ 11.Qxd2 Qe7 Black did not have time for ...fxe5 because the e6-pawn was hanging, but now they will find themselves in a very unpleasant bind. 12.exf6! Recapturing with the g-pawn is not a great idea for Black as the d7-

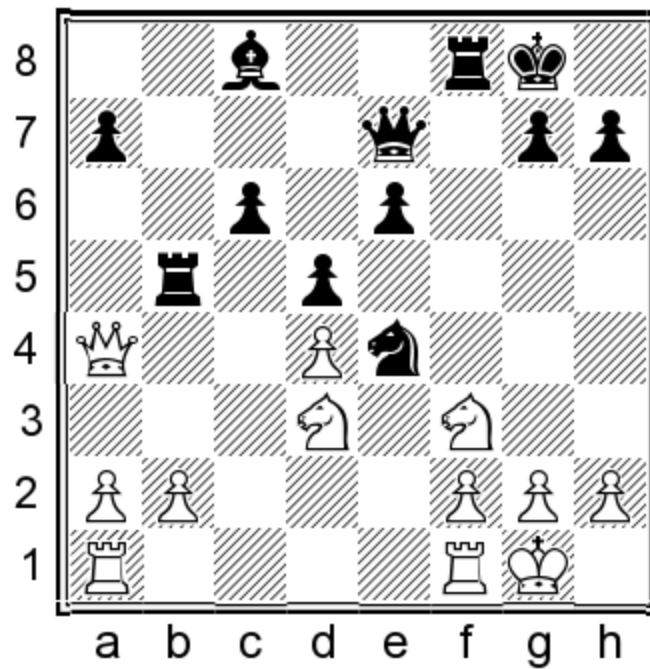
knight needs to be developed somehow, but after 12...Nxf6 White just goes after the dark squares in Black's camp (especially e5) with 13.Bb5! If White succeeds in removing the only defender of the e5-square and installing their own knight on e5 then they would have a great advantage.



*Position after: 13.Bb5!*

Black can try to shake things up a little bit with 13...Ne4  
14.Bxc6+ bxc6 15.Qa5 0-0 16.Nd3

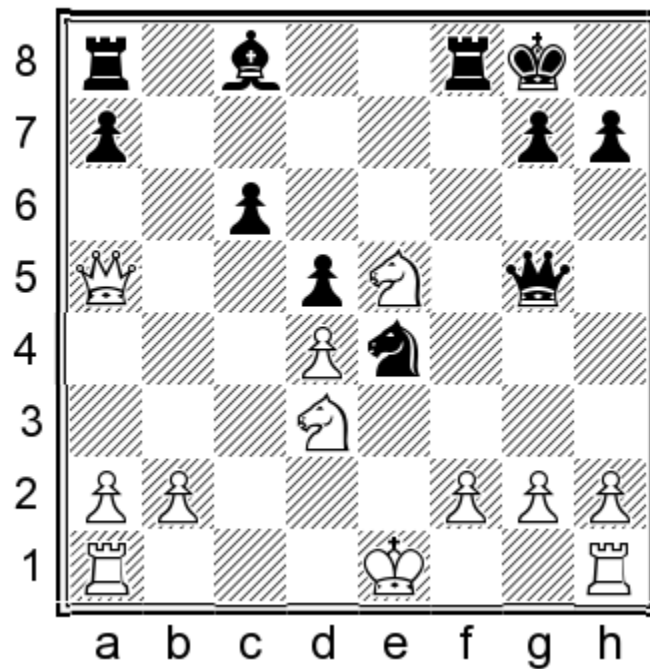
**A)** 16...Rb8 17.0-0 Rb5 18.Qa4



*Position after: 18.Qa4*

18...Rxf3!? is another way of trying to change the course of events but White can keep the grip on the dark squares anyway by playing 19.gxf3 Nd2 20.Ne5!<sup>2</sup>. For such a knight you should not be afraid to return the exchange.

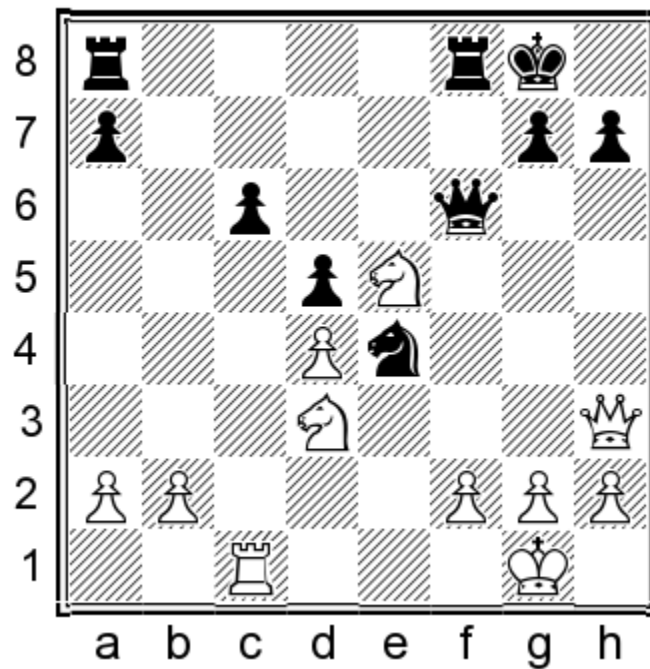
**B)** 16...e5!? 17.Nfxe5 Qg5



*Position after: 17...Qg5*

Out of the blue Black's pieces are becoming very active as unfortunately White has not managed to castle yet.

However, White can keep the position under control with 18.0-0! Bh3 19.Ne1, sacrificing an exchange on f1. White will have a pawn and very active pieces for the exchange which usually brings more than sufficient compensation. 19...Nd2 20.Qc3! As a bonus Black will have some trouble evacuating their knight from f1 as we will go for the h3-bishop instead of the knight. 20...Nxf1 21.Qxh3 Qf6 [Black has to protect against 21...Nd2? 22.Qe6+ Kh8 23.Nf7+-.] 22.N1d3 Nd2 23.Rc1 Ne4

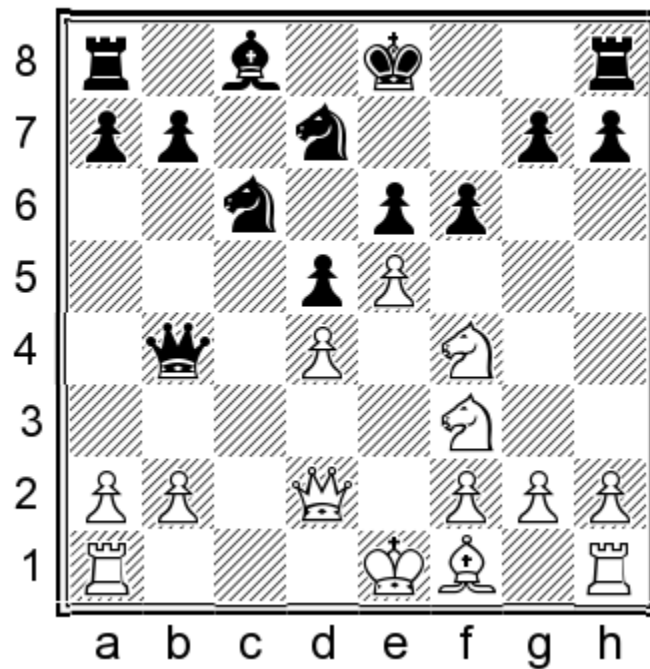


*Position after: 23...Ne4*

24.Rc2<sup>2</sup> There are numerous problems for Black in this position even though they are ahead in material. White's e5-knight is a monster and its d3-colleague is doing a good job of supporting it. White has many ideas to consider ranging from Nd7 through to Qd7 to Rxc6 and it is no fun for Black to calculate all the variations. [The time for action has not come yet as 24.Rxc6 runs into 24...Nxf2!-+; 24.Nd7 is not so bad for White but why should they allow 24...Qxd4<sup>∞</sup> when Black gets some counterplay, if they can choose the calm 24.Rc2 instead?]

**11.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 12.Qd2**





*Position after: 12.Qd2*

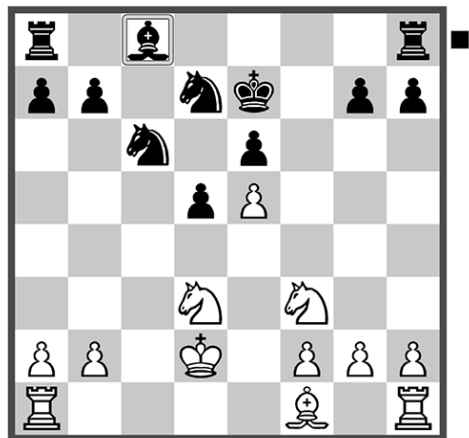
### **12...Ke7**

White should actually force the queens off with Nd3 so it makes sense for Black to make a useful move instead of capturing on d2 immediately. The king move neutralizes White's threat to take on e6 with their f4-knight.

12...Qxd2+ 13.Kxd2 makes sense only if Black follows up with 13...Ndx e5 as White would simply be a few tempi up in comparison with our main line if Black were to continue normally. However, after White deflects Black's hooray-

Black will have a tough threat to play ...e4 and if they manage to stop . safely resign. Note that 17.Nxe5 Nc2+ 18.Kd2 N trapped. After 19...b6 2 the stranded black piece will dominate the rook.

**13.Nd3 Qxd2+ 14.Kxd2 fxe5 15.dxe5**



*Position after: 15.dxe5*

Here Black experiences some difficulties as well as the c8-bishop is passive.

**15...b6**

A nice attempt to develop the light-squared bishop but it is not much better on b7.

**16.Rc1 Bb7**

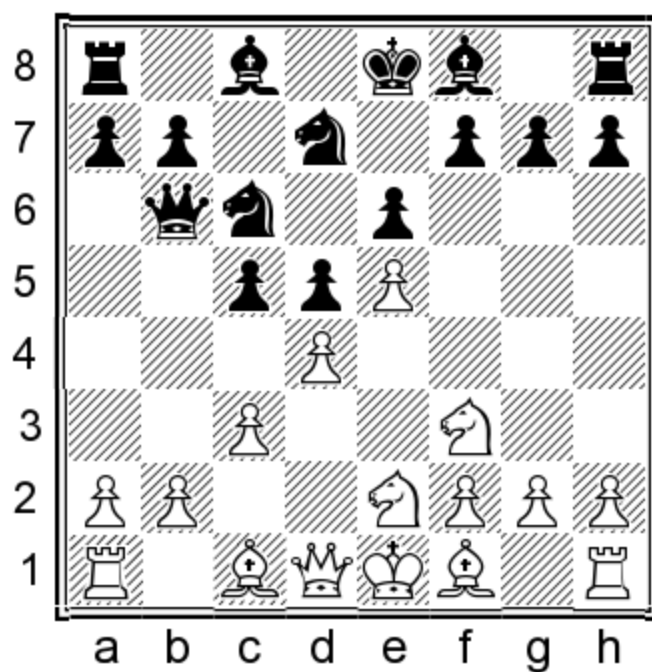
We simply double our rooks on the c-file and find ourselves with a pleasant advantage.

**17.Be2 Rac8 18.Rc3<sup>2</sup>**

# Chapter 8

## 7...Qb6

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 Qb6**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 8 - 7...Qb6

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6  
7.Nf3 Qb6 8.a3

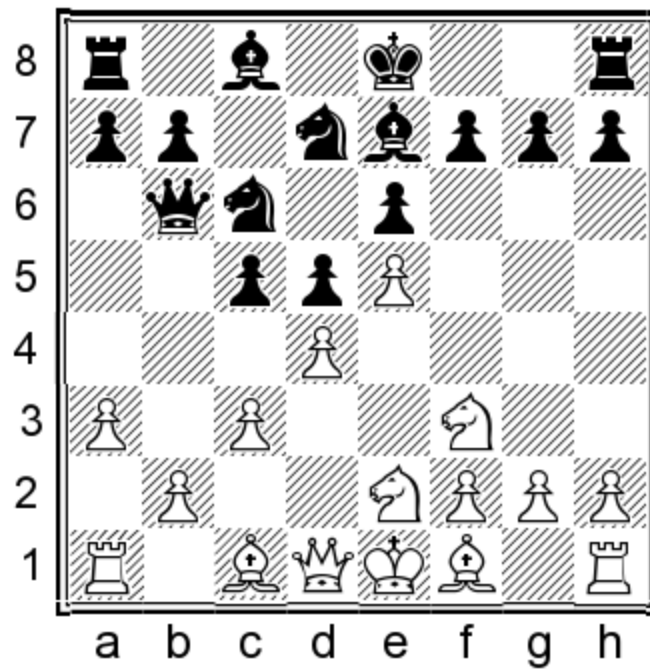
- a) 8...Be7
- b) 8...f6!? & 10...Bd6
- c) 8...f6!? & 10...cxd4
- d) 8...a5

**a) 8...Be7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3  
Nc6 7.Nf3 Qb6**

While 7...Be7 is the most natural response, this line is definitely much tougher to meet than the other 7th move oddities and therefore deserves a dedicated chapter as well. Black will push ...f6 quickly and White needs to be well prepared.

**8.a3 Be7**

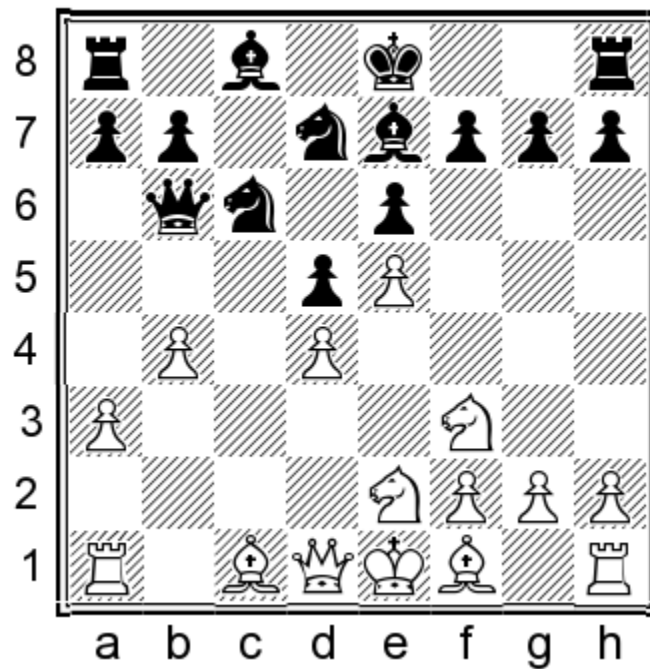


*Position after: 8...Be7*

## 9.b4

I toyed a bit with the aggressive 9.h4 as well but was not satisfied with the outcome after 9...0-0 10.Nf4 cxd4 11.cxd4 f6! when Black's pieces suddenly come to life after 12.Nxe6 Rf7 13.Be3 fxe5∞, and it's anyone's game.

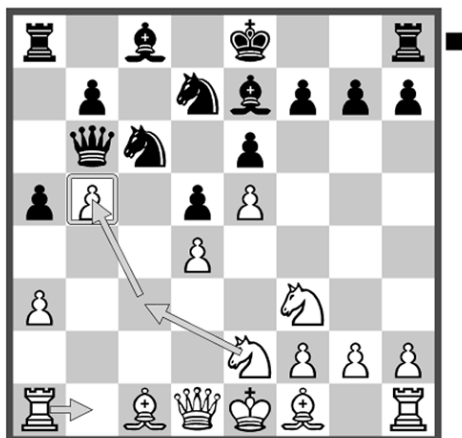
## 9...cxd4 10.cxd4



*Position after: 10.cxd4*

**10...0-0**

10...a5 Black is trying to open the queenside as soon as possible, but in this position it does not work so well due to 11.b5!.

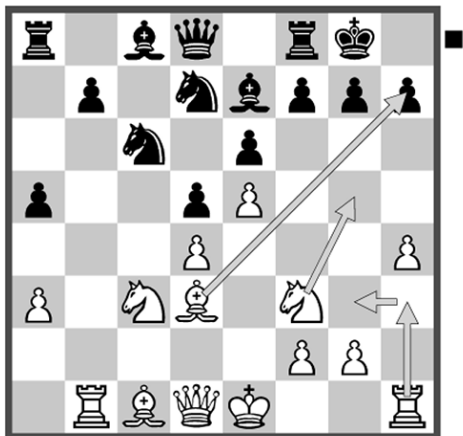


*Position after: 11.b5!*

A thematic sacrifice. White keeps the queenside closed by sacrificing a pawn. They also get the b5-square for their knight and the b-file for the rook. Considering how much White gets in return it is hard to call it a sacrifice at all!

11...Qxb5 12.Nc3 Qb6 13.Rb1 Qd8 14.Bd3

**A)** 14...0-0 15.h4!

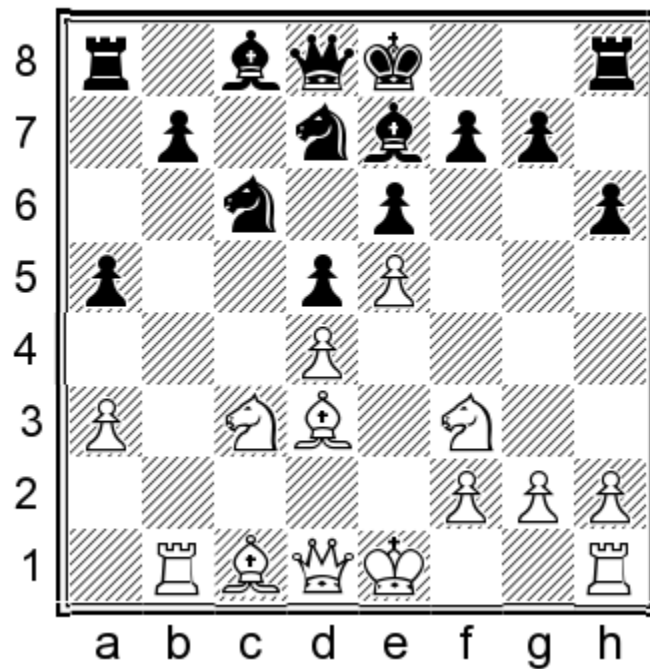


*Position after: 15.h4!*

The problem with castling is that the black king immediately comes under strong pressure. White prepares the (hopefully) already familiar maneuver Rh3-g3 and at the same time secures the g5-square for their knight, setting an insidious trap. 15...b6? 16.Bxh7+! Kxh7 17.Ng5+ Kg8 18.Qh5 and Black will be mated.

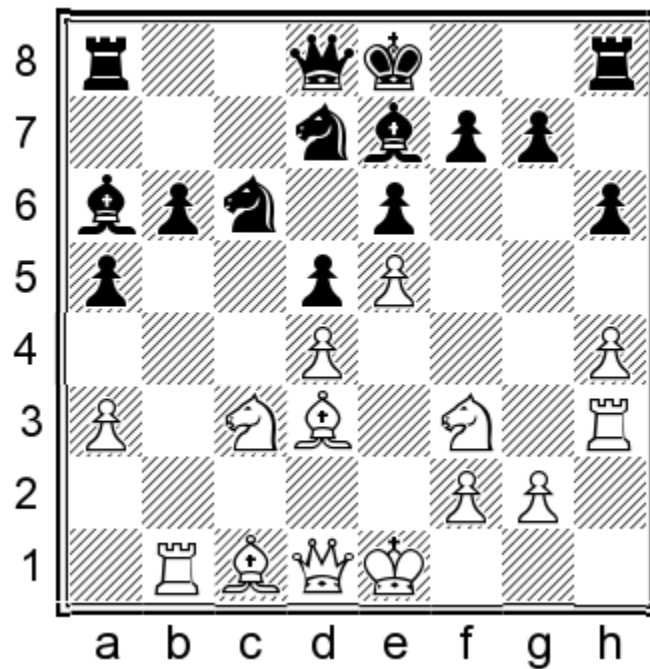
**B)** 14...h6 For the moment Black tries to get by without castling but they cannot delay the question of their king's safety forever.





*Position after: 14...h6*

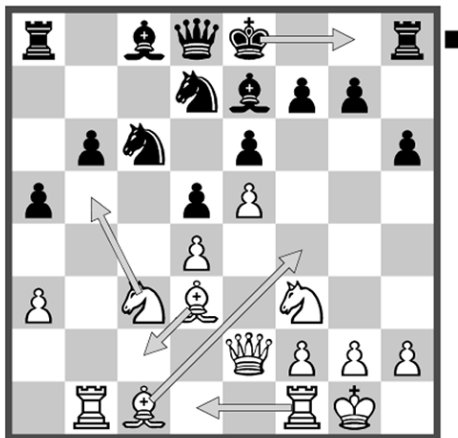
**B1)** The direct 15.h4 and Rh3 is a bit too blunt when Black hasn't castled yet. After the clever 15...b6 16.Rh3 Ba6



*Position after: 16...Ba6*

Black manages to reduce their opponent's attacking potential a bit. 17.Rg3 Bxd3 18.Qxd3 Kf8 19.h5 Kg8 20.Kf1∞ Nevertheless White has a decent compensation. However, we can be even more precise.

**B2) 15.0-0 b6 16.Qe2**



*Position after: 16.Qe2*

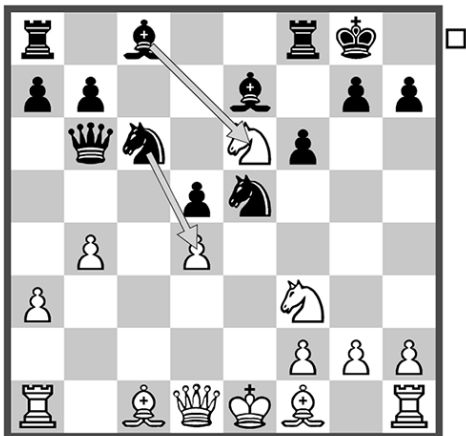
Stopping the exchange of the light-squared bishops. After Black castles kingside White will have plenty of ideas. They can slowly build up their position with moves like Rd1 and then try to either target the h6-weakness with Bf4 and Qe3 or try to build a battery with Nb5, Bc2, and Qd3, with the innocent threat of checkmating Black on the h7-square. At the same time it is rather difficult for Black to find a decent source of counterplay as it would be pointless to try to advance their queenside pawns, and playing ...f6 would only create severe weaknesses on the light squares.

### 11.Nf4 f6

The only sensible attempt to free Black's position, but White always comes out on top.

11...a5 12.b5 is simply terrible as Black cannot even take the b-pawn to compensate for their miserable pieces.

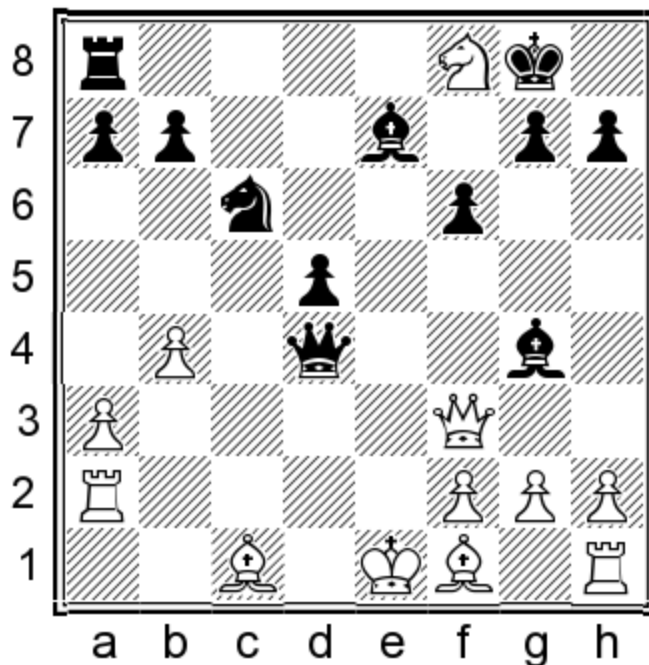
### 12.Nxe6 Ndx5



*Position after: 12...Ndx5*

It is required that White gets their hands a little dirty but the result is well worth it.

**13.Nxf8 Nxf3+ 14.Qxf3 Qxd4 15.Ra2 Bg4**



*Position after: 15...Bg4*

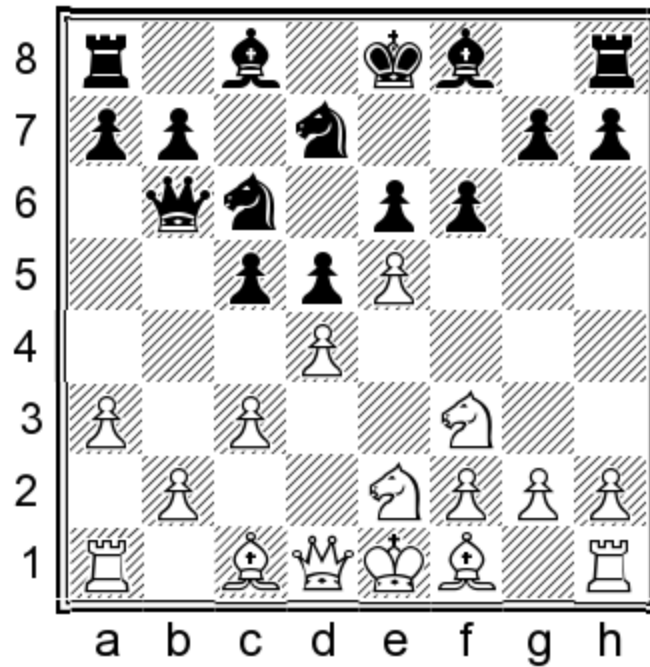
White needs to be pretty precise while avoiding Black's tricks, but ultimately their extra material should prevail.

**16.Qb3<sup>2</sup>**

16.Qe3?? Qd1# would be unfortunate. White wants to develop with Be2 or Be3 and if 16...Qe5+ then 17.Qe3<sup>2</sup> comes. An exchange is an exchange after all.

**b) 8...f6!? & 10...Bd6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 Qb6 8.a3 f6!?**



*Position after: 8...f6!?*

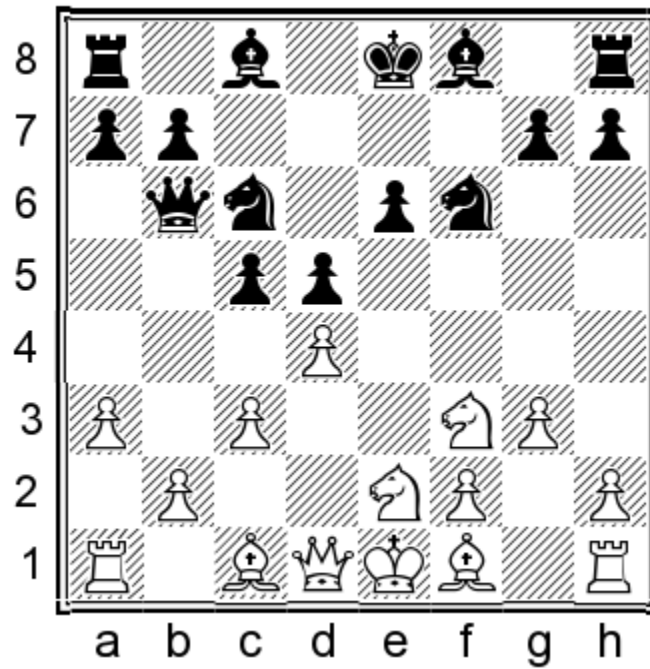
Another attempt to shake White's control over the central squares. This time the Ne2-f4 maneuver is inefficient due to the black queen's position. On d8 it was under a direct knight hit from e6, whereas on b6 it would not come under fire.

We treat this variation the same way as the 7...a5 line, calmly developing with g3 and questioning the usefulness of the ...Qb6 maneuver.

## **9.exf6**

White has to release the tension first, as the e5-pawn was hanging.

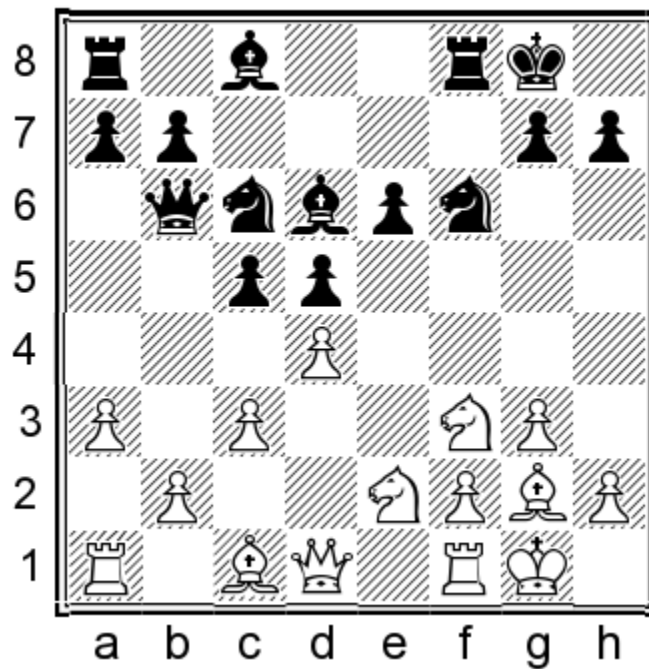
## **9...Nxf6 10.g3**



*Position after: 10.g3*

Now if the game develops slowly, White will be able to claim a comfortable advantage, as Black's queen is rather awkward on b6.

**10...Bd6 11.Bg2 0-0 12.0-0**



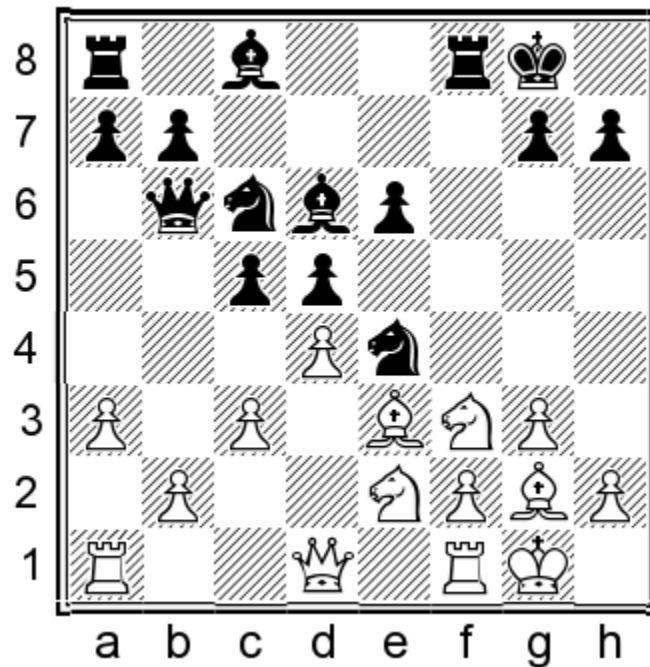
*Position after: 12.0-0*

No matter what set-up Black chooses, they will always find themselves in a rather cramped position. If they dare to place their knight on e4, the courageous piece will be very unstable. Otherwise we are ready to play Bf4 and perform the positionally favorable bishop exchange even at the cost of the b2-pawn as the queen's greedy trip would give us a lot of time to develop the initiative.

### **12...Bd7**

**A)** 12...Ne4 Black has been postponing the standard exchange on d4 for way too long and now comes the punishment. It is quite obvious that White should undermine the e4-knight's position with c4, but the important question is whether additional preparation is needed or not. 13.Be3! The threat of c4 has grown to immense proportions and the defender is basically forced

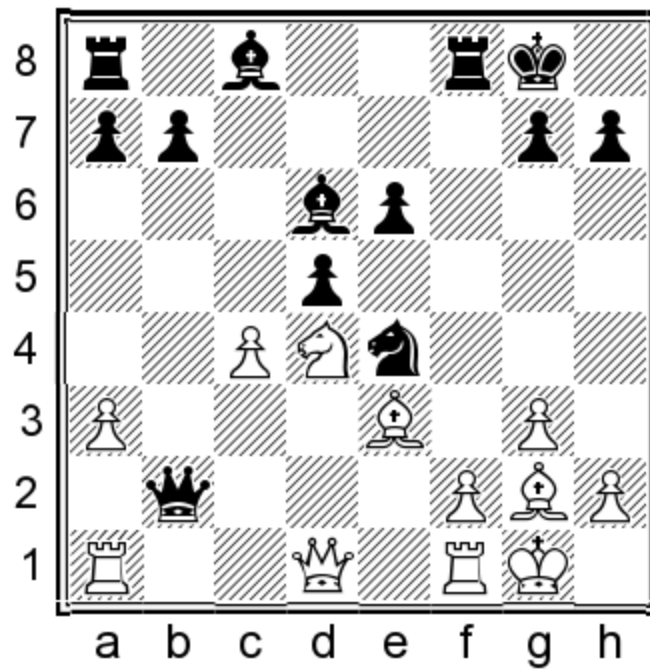
to accept the poisoned pawn. [It would be lovely to bash out 13.c4 immediately, but unfortunately things are far from clear after 13...Nxd4 14.Nfxd4 cxd4 15.Nxd4 Bc5 16.Be3 e5]



*Position after: 13.Be3!*

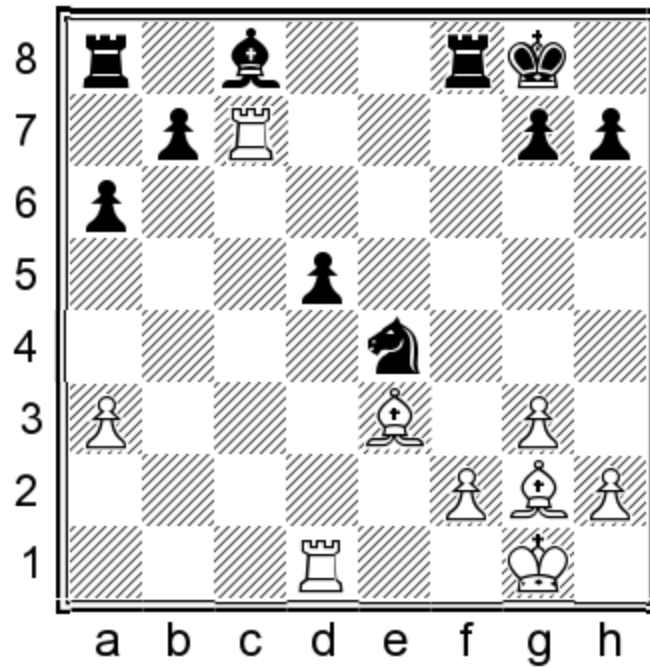
**A1)** It is too late to reconsider and take 13...cxd4 as White is not obliged to recapture with a pawn, but rather keeps the c4 option in stock and plays 14.Nfxd4 Nxd4 15.Nxd4 Qxb2 16.c4!





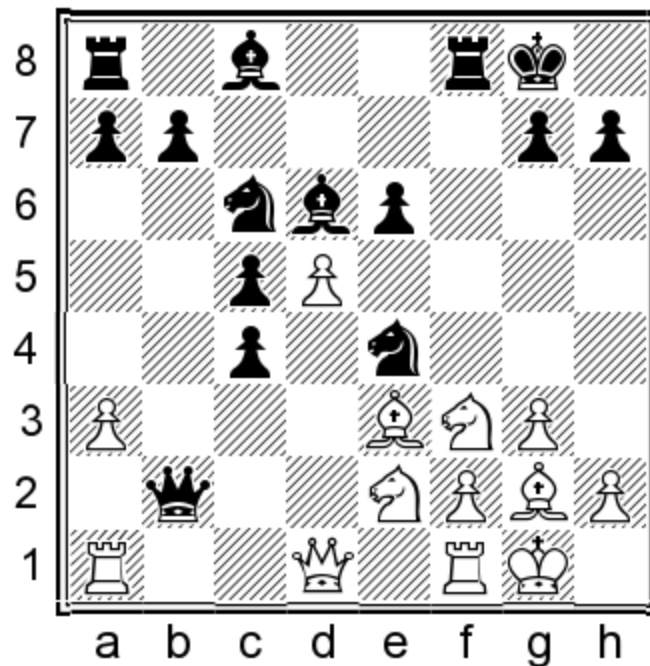
*Position after: 16.c4!*

with an even worse position for Black than after the immediate 13...Qxb2. The French barricades are collapsing even if Black manages to exchange queens, for example 16...Nc3 17.Qc1 Qxc1 18.Raxc1 Ne4 19.Nb5 Bb8 20.Rfd1 a6 21.cxd5 exd5 22.Nc7 Bxc7 23.Rxc7



*Position after: 23.Rxc7*

and White starts collecting material with interest. Note that after 23...Nf6 24.Rxd5! is a sweet touch. 24...Nxd5 25.Bxd5+ Kh8 26.Bd4+- **A2)** 13...Qxb2 14.c4! dxc4 15.d5! These pawn pushes should come very naturally to you – because White has a clear lead in development, they aim to open the position as soon as possible.

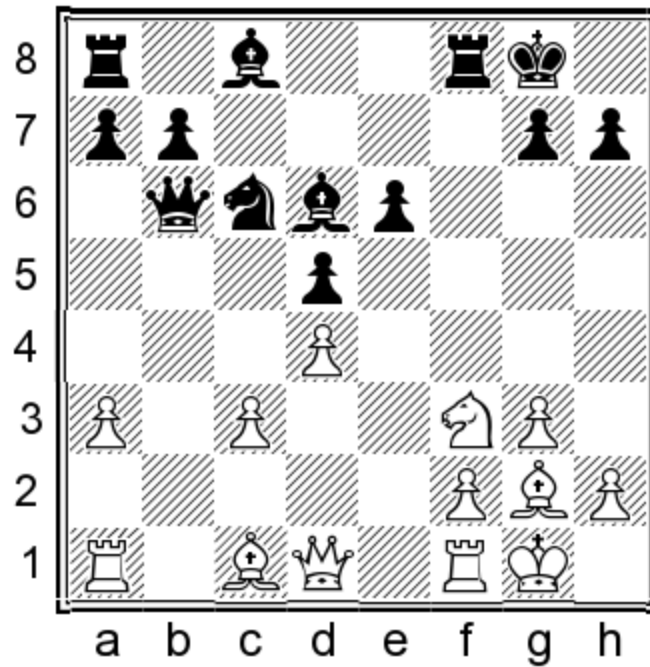


*Position after: 15.d5!*

**A2.1)** 15...exd5 Opening the position voluntarily is rather cooperative and after 16.Qxd5+ Kh8 17.Nh4! intending to recapture on e4 with the bishop and bring another piece into attack, Black's position looks to be in some danger.

**A2.2)** 15...Ne7 16.Nh4! Once again bringing the g2-rocket launcher into action. The point is that after 16...exd5 17.Bxe4 Black cannot restore the material balance with 17...dxe4? 18.Qxd6 Qxe2 because White wins the all-you-can-eat competition with 19.Qxe7+- . Black should instead choose not to recapture the e4-bishop. Although they have three pawns for the piece, due to their uncoordinated pieces they are still worse.

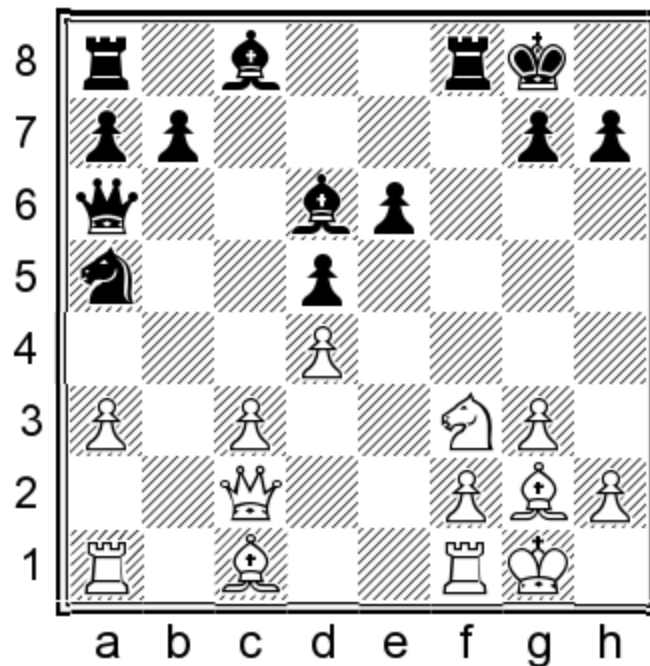
**B)** 12...cxd4 13.cxd4 Ne4 14.Nc3 After the exchange of c-pawns there is no c4-thrust, but now the path for the knight is clear. 14...Nxc3 15.bxc3



*Position after: 15.bxc3*

White's plan here is incredibly simple; they plan Qd3 and Ng5, creating the threat of checkmate on h7.

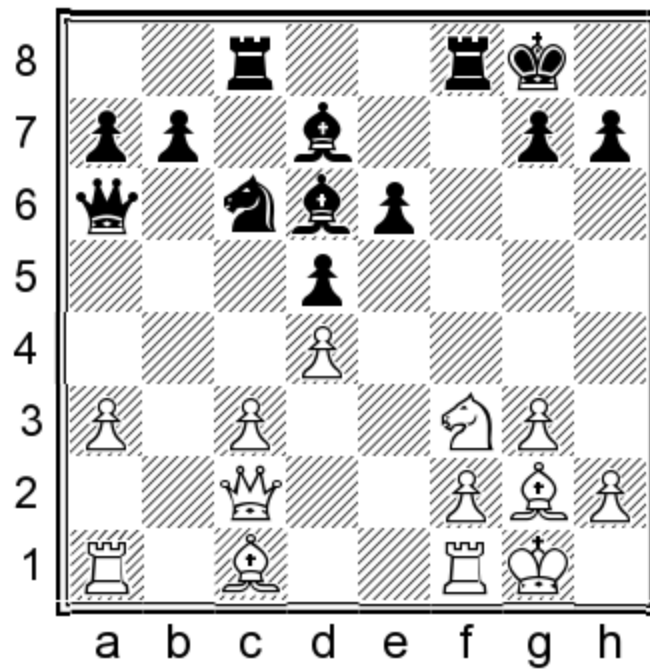
**B1)** 15...Na5 16.Qd3 Qa6 cannot stop White from executing their plan as after 17.Qc2!



*Position after: 17.Qc2!*

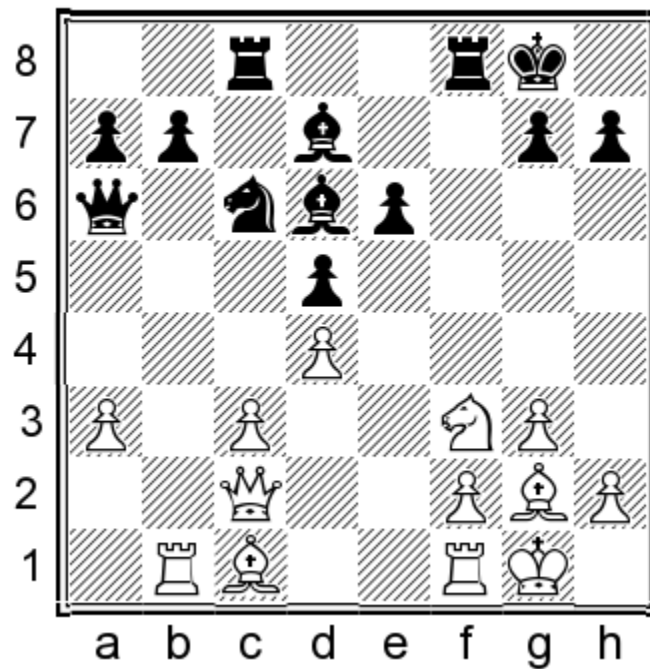
Black is not in time to play ...Rac8. Note that White dragged the queen to a6 first so that the defensive resource ...Qb3 would not be available! 17...Bd7 18.Ng5 g6 A sad concession. 19.Re1<sup>2</sup> White will continue with h4 and a4, gradually taking control over the whole board while the threat of h4-h5 and attacking the weak Black king will always be hanging in the air.

**B2)** 15...Bd7 Black is intending to create counterplay with ...Rac8 quickly, therefore we need to be extra clever too. 16.Qc2! As Black's knight is not on a5 yet, we are always in time to insert Rb1, forcing the enemy queen to an unfavorable position. [Be careful not to step into 16.Qd3? Qa6 17.Qc2 Rac8



*Position after: 17...Rac8*

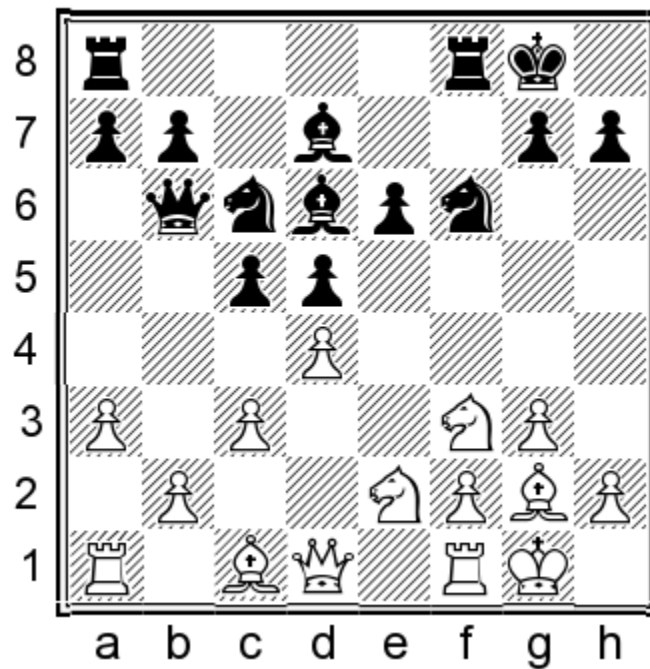
though, as after 18.Ng5 Rf5 19.Re1 Nxd4 20.Qd1 Nb5 21.Bf1 Bc5 22.Bf4 Qb6 23.Qd2 White is missing a tempo for Rb1 in comparison with 16.Qc2 and Black is able to untie themselves with 23...Nxa3μ.] 16...Rac8 17.Rb1! Qa6



*Position after: 17...Qa6*

If you compare this line with the 16.Qd3? option you will easily understand the importance of including Rb1.

18.Ng5 Rf5 19.Re1! The e6-pawn is very difficult to cover now and the tactics after 19...Nxd4 don't favor Black, e.g. 20.Qd1 Nb5 21.Bf1! and Black is simply unable to stop all the threats to both the b5-knight and e6-pawn. 21...Bc5 22.Bf4 Qb6 23.Qd2± Thanks to the weakness of the b5-knight, the e6-pawn is actually still hanging and at the same time a4 is a killer threat. Black is under a lot of pressure here.



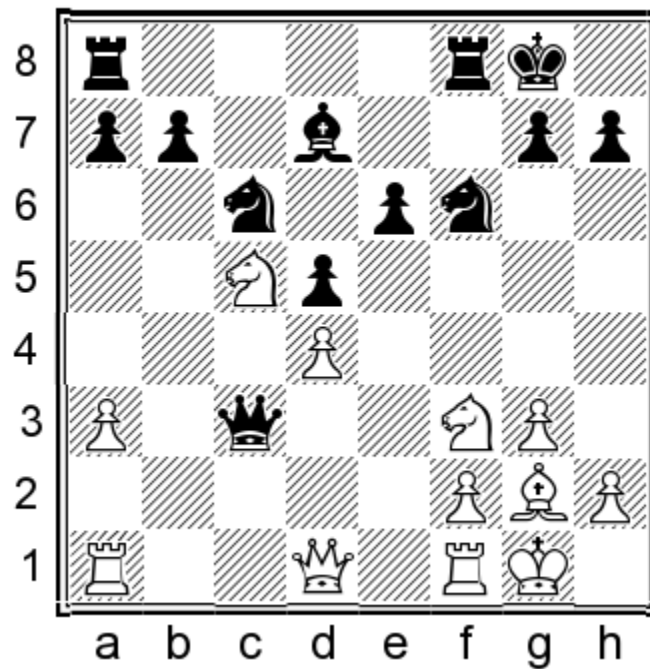
*Position after: 12...Bd7*

### **13.Be3!**

It is nice to recommend this move as it is best in the 12...Ne4 line as well. Black might be able to eliminate the bishop with ...Ng4 here but we are always able to claim an edge. If you are not comfortable with the ensuing positions, feel free to explore the alternative 13.Bf4 move too. Ultimately, 13.Be3 feels much simpler though.

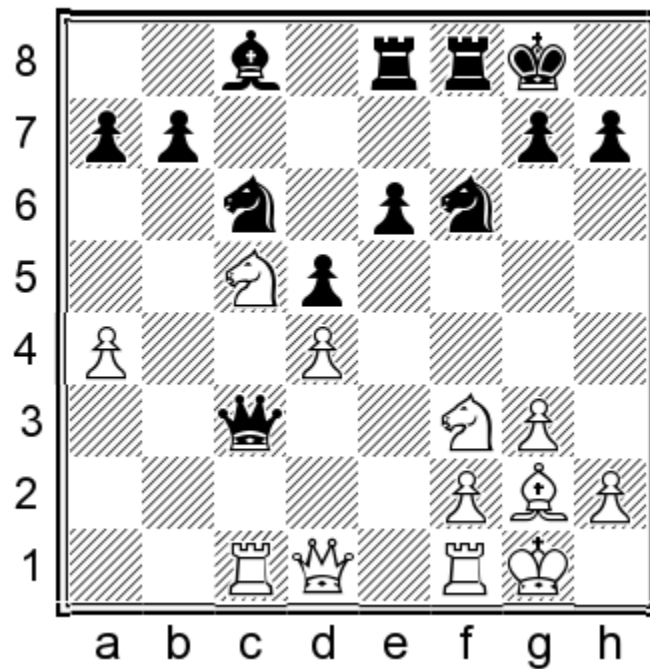
13.Bf4!? is a nice positional pawn sacrifice. Exchanging the dark-squared bishops is a great achievement for White as the e5 and c5-squares will be weak now and in this concrete situation it is even worth a pawn. 13...Bxf4 14.Nxf4 Qxb2 Otherwise there is only suffering for no material compensation. 15.Nd3 Qxc3 16.Nxc5





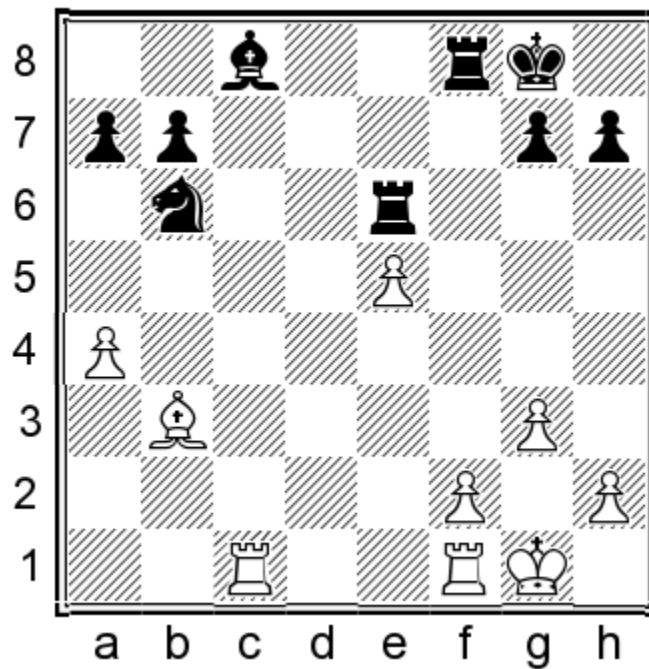
*Position after: 16.Nxc5*

Note how the knight immediately utilizes the absence of the dark-squared bishop and hops onto the weakened square. 16...Rae8 17.a4! The knight would be stranded on b7. Keeping the positional domination is much more important, this move prepares Rc1. 17...Bc8 18.Rc1



*Position after: 18.Rc1*

**A)** 18...Qa5 doesn't keep the center under control, so we can hop into the e5-square as well. 19.Ne5! It is paramount that after 19...Nxe5 20.dxe5 the unfortunate f6-knight has no good squares because 20...Nd7 fails to 21.Nxe6! Rxe6 22.Qxd5 Qxd5 23.Bxd5 Nb6 24.Bb3



*Position after: 24.Bb3*

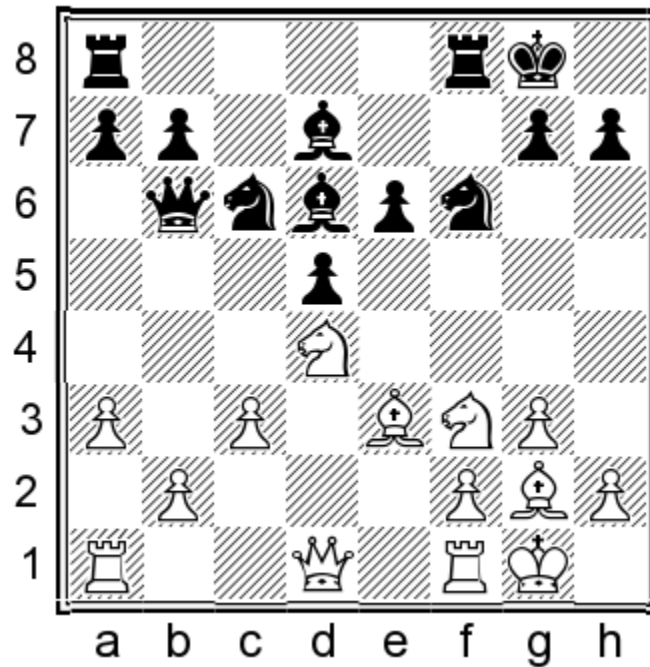
when White is threatening both to capture on c8 and play a5. 24...Kf7 does not help due to 25.f4! Ke7 26.Rc7+ Bd7 27.Bxe6 Kxe6 28.a5 Nd5 29.Rxb7+- and with Black losing so many pawns it looks more like a game of checkers instead.

**B)** 18...Qb2 19.Rb1 It is definitely pleasant to develop the rook with tempi. 19...Qc3 Draw? 20.Re1<sup>2</sup> No! White can develop even more pressure with Re3 and Bh3/Ng5, targeting the e6-weakness. Black's extra pawn can hardly be felt at all and they are lacking a sensible plan.

### **13...cxd4**

13...Ng4 14.Bf4! is a much better version of the 13.Bf4 variation as the g4-knight is clearly misplaced.

### **14.Nexd4!**

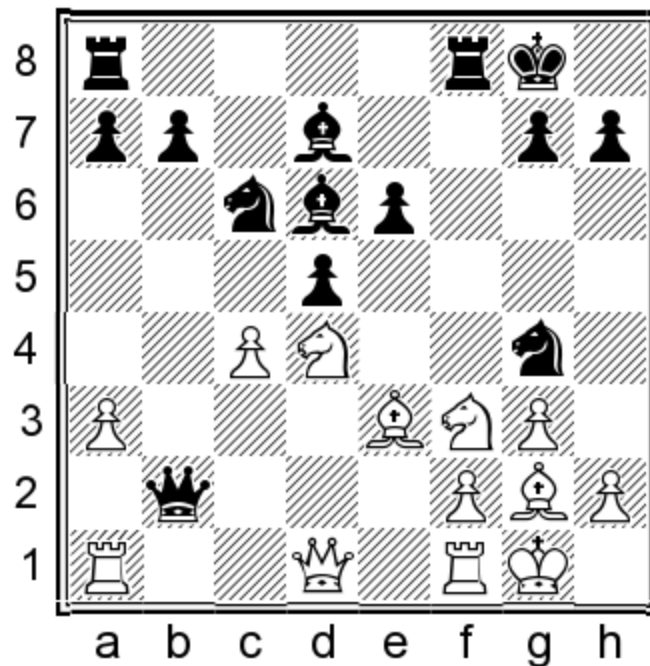


*Position after: 14.Nexd4!*

As always, we do not want the e3-bishop to be blinded by its own pawn.

### **14...Ng4**

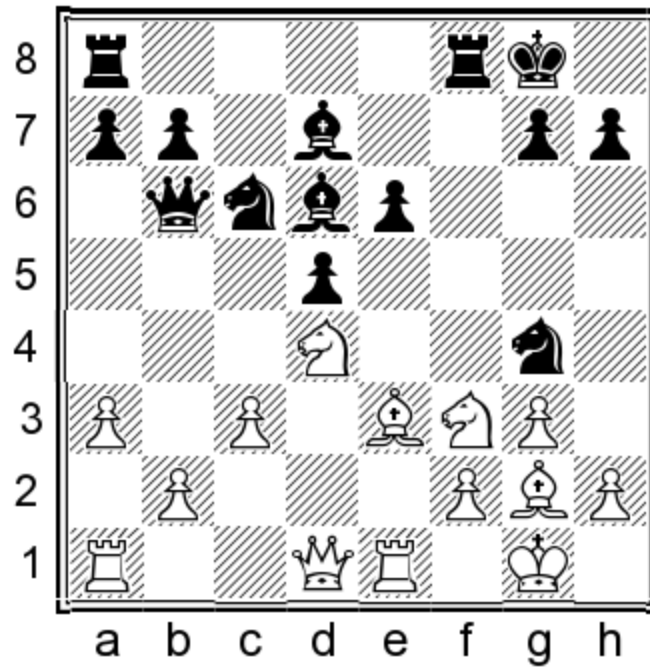
14...Qxb2 15.c4 is rather dangerous for Black as their center is under a lot of pressure and many of their pieces are hanging along the d-file. White has threats like Rb1xb7, or Nb5, trapping the queen on b2, therefore Black should try to force matters with 15...Ng4



*Position after: 15...Ng4*

but here White has a nice tactical blow 16.Nxe6! Bxe6 17.cxd5 Nxe3 18.fxe3 Qc3 19.dxe6 Qxe3+ 20.Kh1<sup>2</sup>, where they come out on top with a very strong passer on e6. White will support it with Re1 next. Note that 20...Qxe6? 21.Ng5!+- is already very bad for Black who is unable to defend their d6-bishop and the a2-g8 diagonal at the same time.

**15.Re1!**

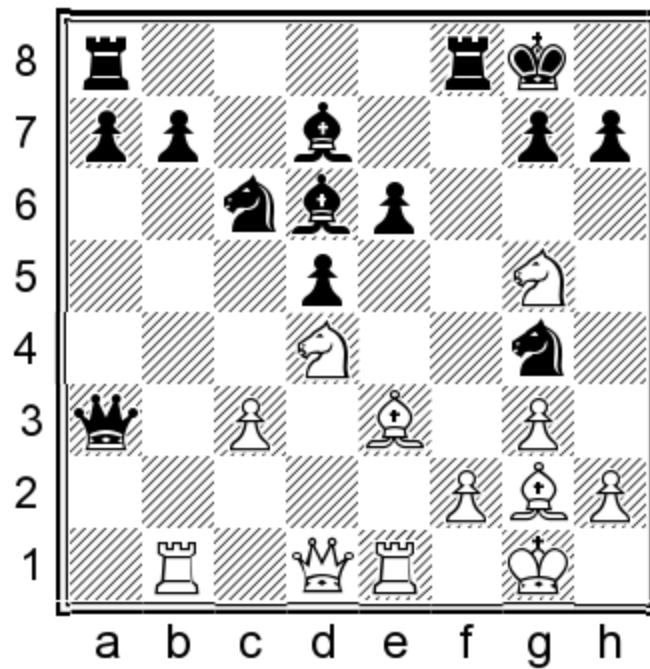


*Position after: 15.Re1!*

This move is pretty deep. It is both targeting the e6-pawn and getting ready to trap the enemy queen in some lines!

**15...Nxe3**

Taking the b2-pawn is dangerous as ever. 15...Qxb2 16.Rb1 Qxa3 17.Ng5!

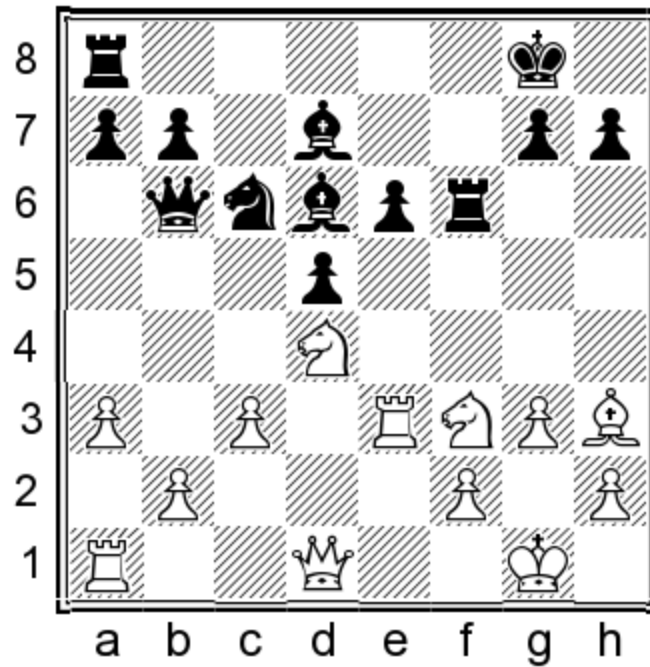


*Position after: 17.Ng5!*

Increasing pressure on e6. 17...Nxe3 18.Rxe3 Nxd4 19.cxd4 Qa2 20.Re2! The queen is a little annoying on a2, where it is attacking the b1-rook and protecting the d5-pawn.

20...Qa6 Well, not anymore! 21.Nxe6± The d5-pawn will fall soon as well and White will have tremendous piece activity in a position with equal material.

**16.Rxe3 Rf6 17.Bh3!**



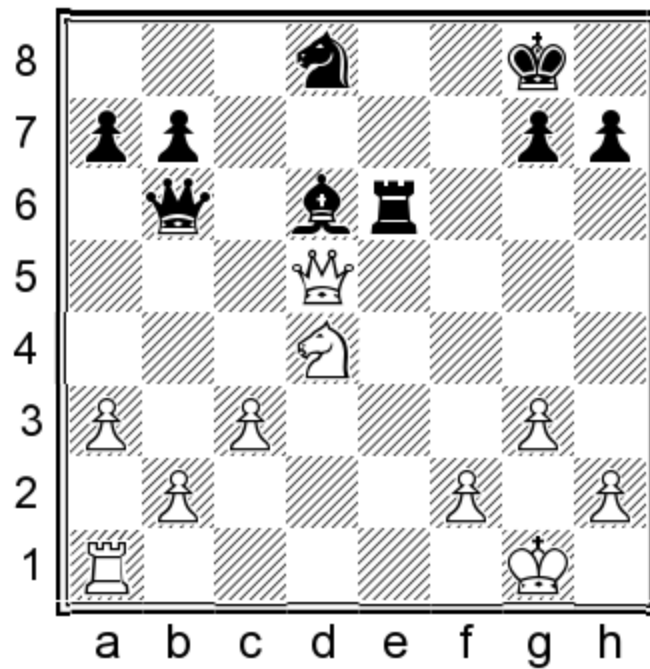
*Position after: 17.Bh3!*

The pressure on e6 is very unpleasant and Black is forced to make a positional concession.

### **17...Nxd4**

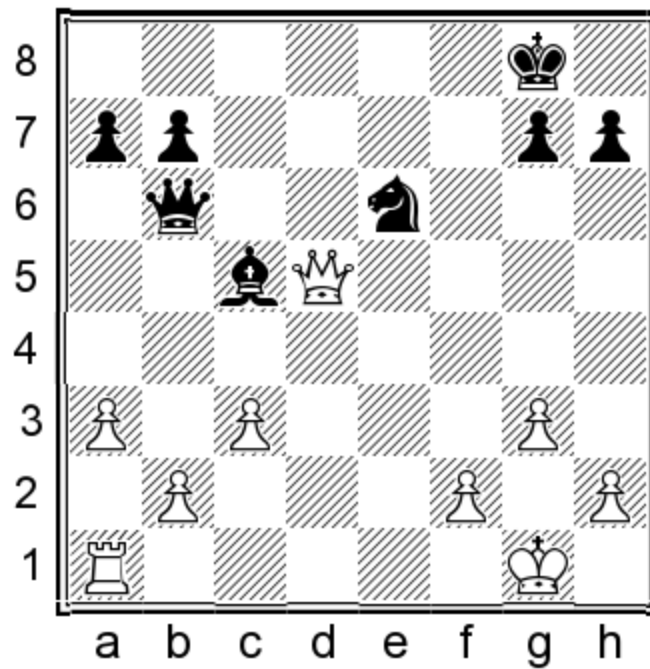
Black would very much like not to change the pawn structure but the problem with 17...Re8 is 18.Nxe6! Bxe6 19.Bxe6+ Rxe6 20.Rxe6 Rxe6 21.Qxd5 Nd8 22.Nd4 when Black's two pieces will be inferior to White's rook.





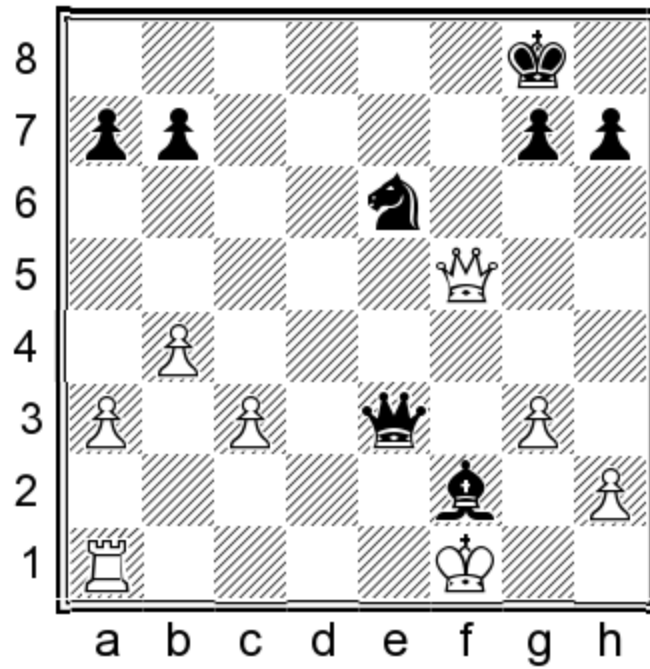
*Position after: 22.Nd4*

The immediate threat is Re1. Another problem is that even endgames after exchanging on e6 straight away are better for White, so the only remaining question is how much more can White's edge grow? 22...Bc5 The most principled response, aiming to generate counterplay on f2, but tactics do not work in Black's favor. [22...Qc5 23.Qa2! Keeping the rook pinned! 23...Qe5 24.Rd1± Black somehow managed to stop Re1 but the rook has another nice spot.] 23.Nxe6 Nxe6



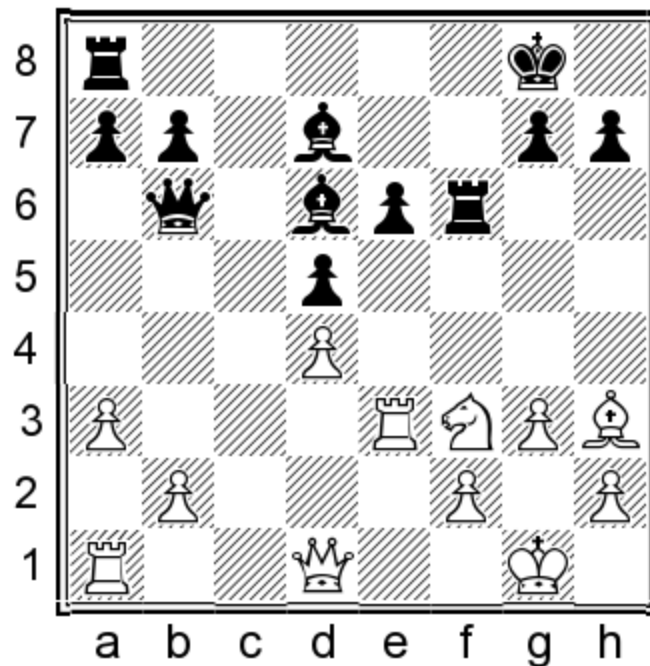
*Position after: 23...Nxe6*

24.b4! Even calm moves like 24.Kg2 lead to a big advantage for White but when you have a change to go for an instant kill, you go for it. 24...Bxf2+ Otherwise White's rook goes to e1 and it is over immediately. 25.Kf1! White's rook is threatening to come to the e-file via a2 and 25...Qe3 runs into 26.Qf5!+–, trapping the bishop.



*Position after: 26.Qf5!+- Now it is plain to see that moving the king to g2 instead would be imprecise as we need to take the e1-square away from the bishop.*

**18.cxd4**



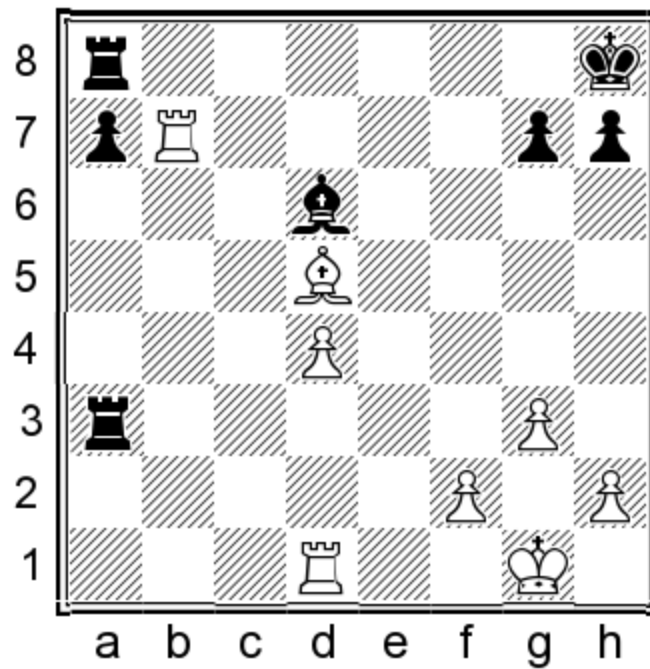
*Position after: 18.cxd4*

White was able to stabilize their edge – the e6-weakness is now fixed and Black will have to defend it forever, while it is not clear how they should obtain any counterplay.

### **18...Qxb2**

Thanks to the rook being on e3, this greedy move is bad. The queen is not trapped yet after 19.Rb3 Ba4

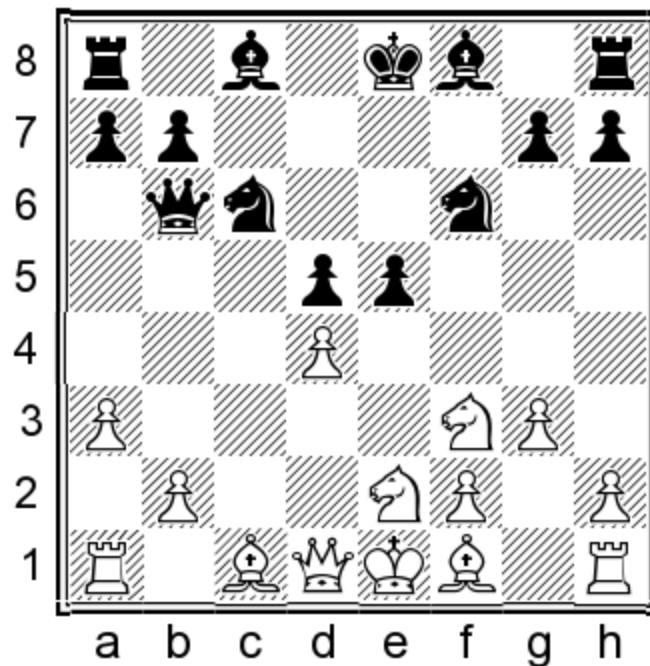
but Black will be forced to defend a very gloomy endgame after the forced 20.Rxb2 Bxd1 21.Rxd1 Rxf3 22.Bxe6+ Kh8 23.Bxd5 Rxa3 24.Rxb7±.



*Position after: 24.Rxb7±*

**c) 8...f6!? & 10...cxd4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3  
Nc6 7.Nf3 Qb6 8.a3 f6!? 9.exf6 Nxf6 10.g3 cxd4  
11.cxd4 e5!**

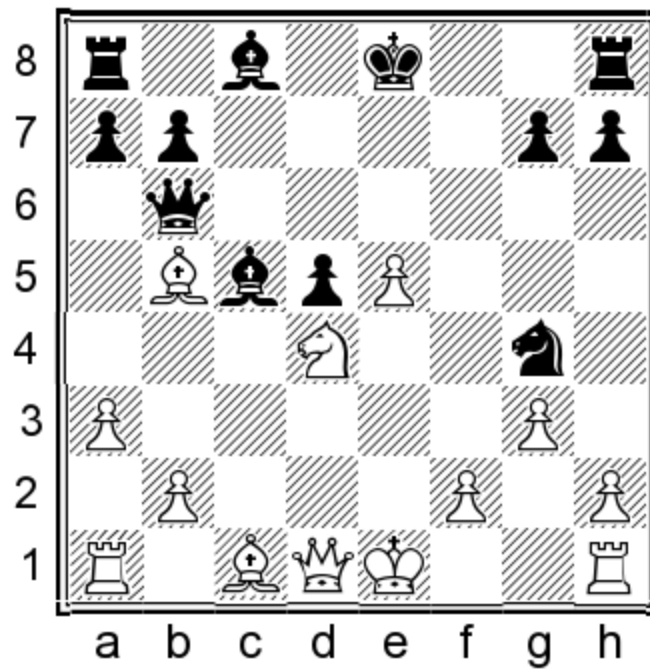


*Position after: 11...e5!*

This is the most testing response, immediately changing the character of the position. Although the position seems very tense, the following sequence is rather forcing. Even if Black navigates the position equally well (which is far from guaranteed!), your position should always remain the easier to play.

**12.Nxe5 Nxe5 13.dxe5 Bc5**

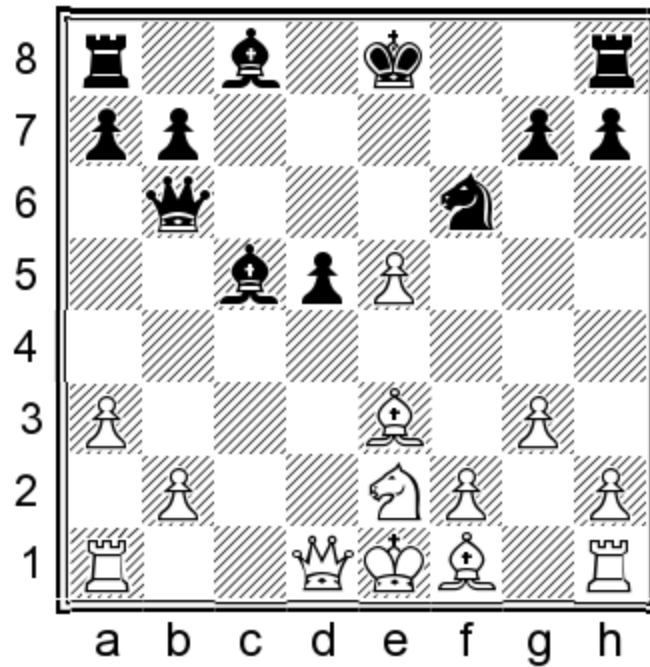
13...Ng4 is very natural and at the same time the first chance for Black to go completely astray. 14.Nd4 Bc5 [14...Nxe5 fails due to a nasty check 15.Qh5+ Ng6 16.Bb5+!+- and Black's position is going to be ruined.] 15.Bb5+!



*Position after: 15.Bb5+!*

It turns out that it's actually Black's king which is in trouble as long as you remember to counter 15...Kf7 16.Qf3+ Nf6 17.exf6 Bxd4 with 18.Be2!, not getting too greedy with 18.fxf7+, and intending to simply castle quickly. Black cannot hope to both develop their position and restore the material balance at the same time.

**14.Be3**



*Position after: 14.Be3*

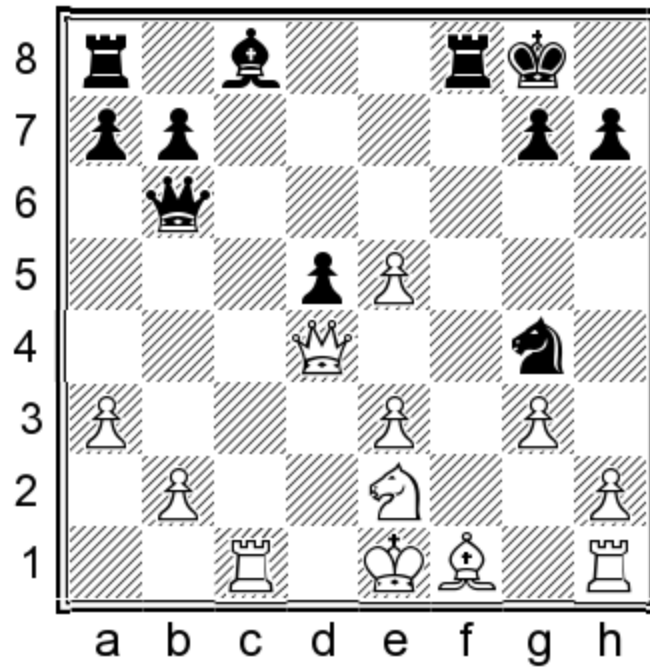
An only move, which actually is a good thing for White as there is very little room for error.

**14...Bxe3 15.fxe3 Ng4 16.Qd4**

Again the only move. With their material advantage White would definitely like to exchange queens.

**16...0-0 17.Rc1!**



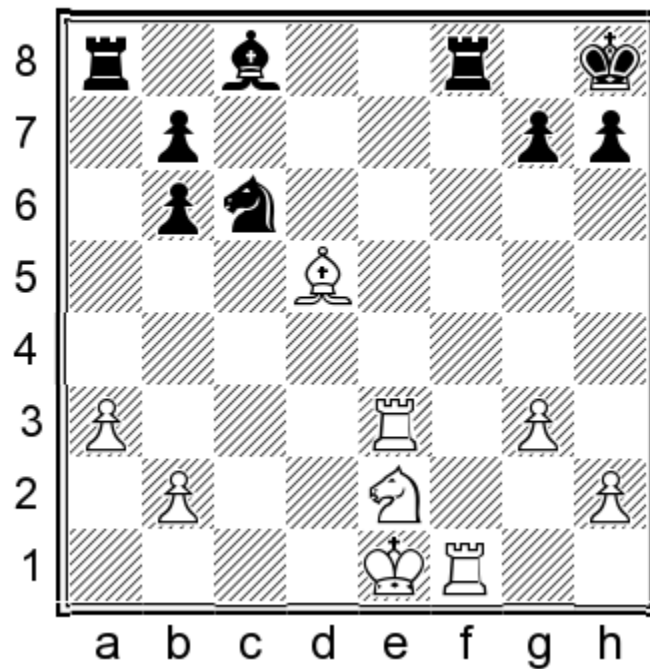


*Position after: 17.Rc1!*

Only this is a difficult one. As Rc1 is a very useful move, White is in no rush to exchange queens right away. Black has only one similar developing move at his disposal, ...Bf5, but as we'll see the bishop is not that well placed on f5.

### **17...Bf5**

**A)** 17...Nxe3 As you will see in the main line too, e3 is not the pawn that should get preferential treatment. Black will have to waste more time to liquidate the dangerous e5-passer and after 18.Qxb6 axb6 19.Rc3 Nc4 20.Bg2 Nxe5 21.Bxd5+ Kh8 22.Re3! Nc6 23.Rf1!<sup>2</sup> White has a very pleasant endgame.



*Position after: 23.Rf1!²*

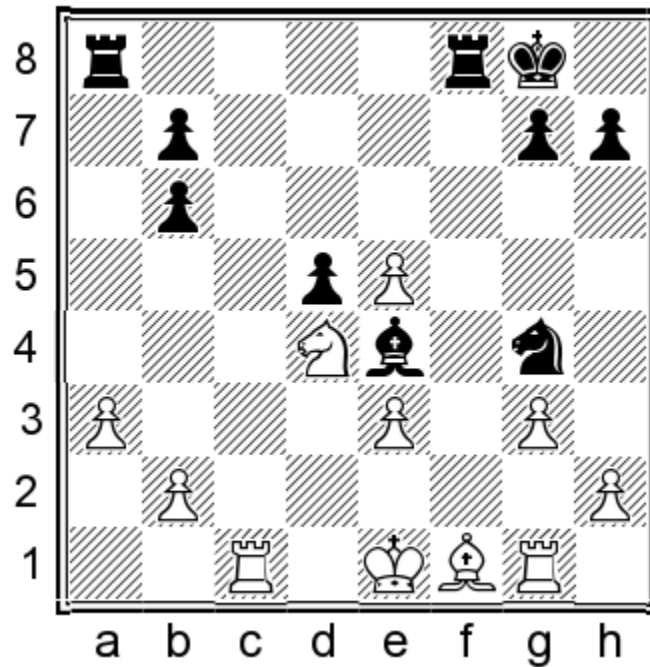
They managed to kick the enemy knight away from its superior position on e5 and after the rook exchange all their pieces will be very active. Also note that b6 is a permanent weakness.

**B)** Black cannot really avoid the queen exchange because after 17...Qh6 18.Nf4± with Bh3 and castles coming next White has all the trumps.

**18.Qxb6 axb6 19.Nd4!**

The black bishop has to move again and White will eventually be able to develop the rest of their pieces.

**19...Be4 20.Rg1**

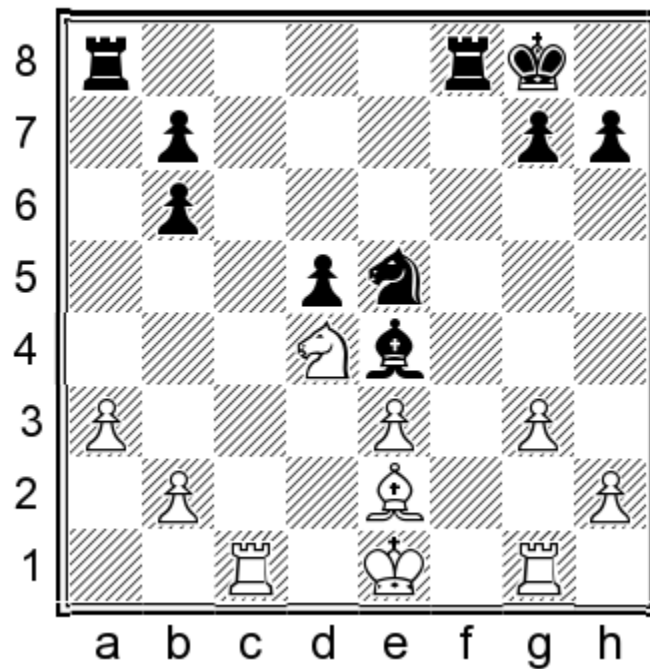


*Position after: 20.Rg1*

### **20...Nxe5**

20...Nxe5 21.Bb5! As in curling, White's bishop is clearing the way for the e5-passer; specifically it is taking the e8-square under control. The position is quite dangerous, for example 21...Nf5 22.Ne2 Rf7 23.e6 Rf6 24.Bd7 Nd6 25.Nd4<sup>2</sup> and the runner is still alive and causing Black a headache.

### **21.Be2**

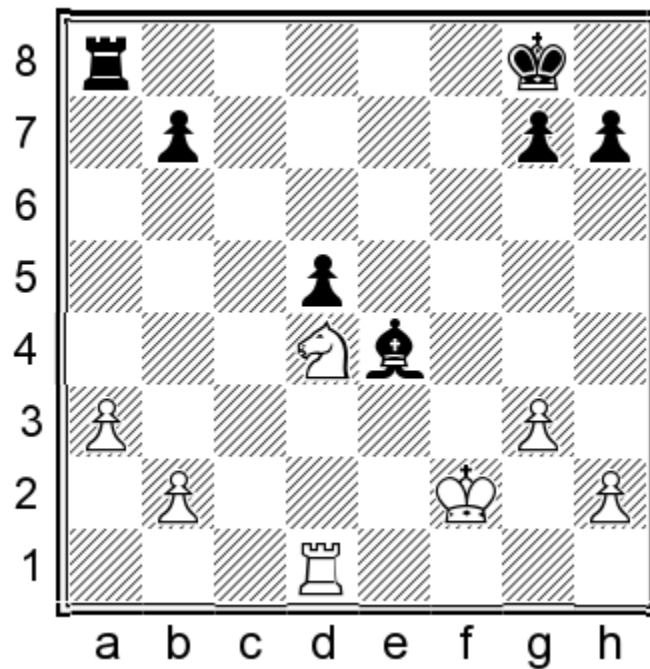


*Position after: 21.Be2*

It would be tempting to stop here and claim an advantage thanks to the better pawn structure, but for the sake of clarity let us investigate a tad further.

### **21...Ra5!?**

This is the computer's suggestion. Its idea is to play ...Rc5. 21...b5 is attempting to force matters but the principled response 22.Nxb5 Nf3+ 23.Bxf3 Rxf3 24.Nd4 Rxe3+ 25.Kf2 Rd3 26.Rgd1 Rxd1 27.Rxd1<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 27.Rxd1<sup>2</sup>*

still looks rather shaky for Black. If White manages to exchange the second pair of rooks as well, their opponent might find themselves in great trouble very quickly as the d5-pawn needs constant protection and the importance of White's queenside pawn majority is increasing rapidly.

## **22.Kd2**

After White's last however, ...Rc5 achieves nothing because the c1-rook is not hanging anymore and White establishes control over the c-file with Nd4-e6. Therefore Black plays 22...Nc4+ 23.Bxc4 dxc4

relying on counterplay with ...Rf2.

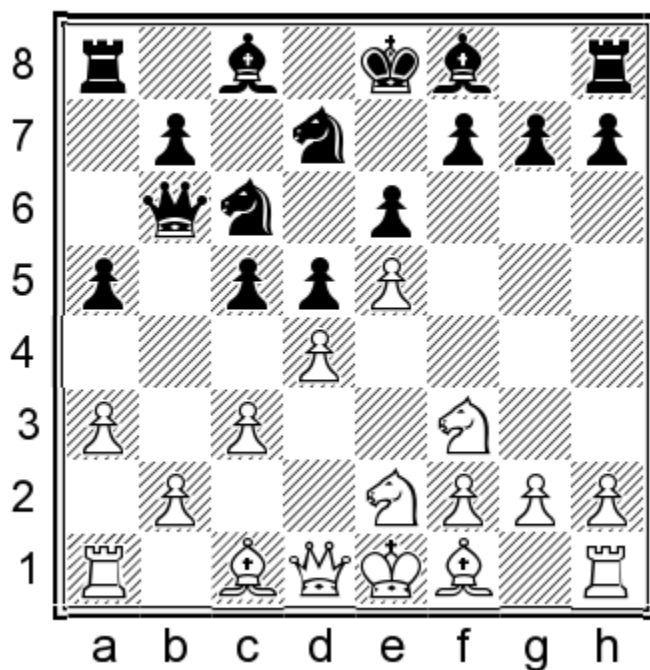
## **24.Rgf1**

After this move, it is clear that White is still pushing. Black needs to worry about their c4-pawn, the potential runner on e3, and the fact that their king is out of play on g8. There is still work to be done though.

#### d) 8...a5

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 Qb6 8.a3**

Finally we come to the move 8...a5

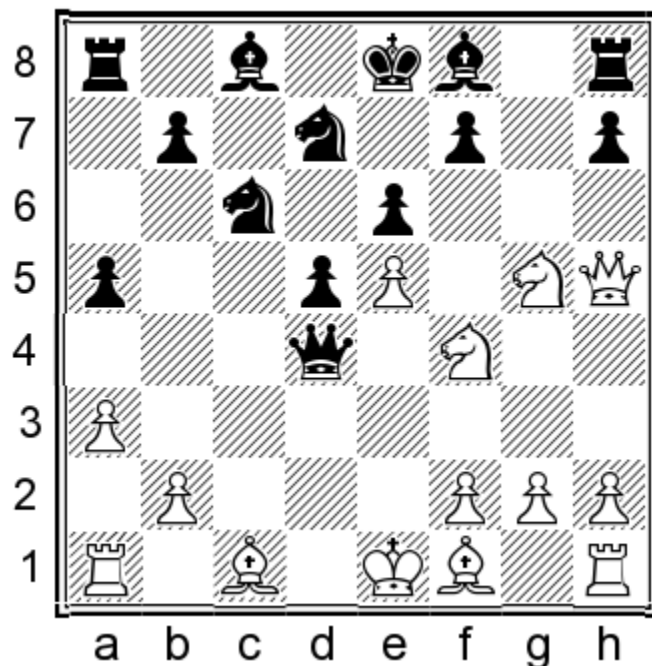


*Position after: 8...a5*

intending ...a4 and ...Qb3, as is suggested by Aagaard and Ntirlis in *Playing the French*. We continue our kingside expansion in the usual fashion.

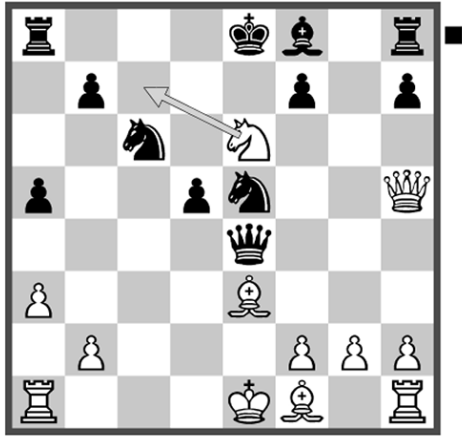
**9.Nf4 a4**

9...cxd4 10.cxd4 loses some flexibility for Black. If they proceed with something slow like ...a4 or ...Be7, we simply adopt the same set-up as seen previously with h4 and Be2. White can definitely benefit from the 3rd rank being open by playing Rh3 later. The adventurous plan of 10...g5 does not promise any good either. 11.Nxg5 Qxd4 12.Qh5!



*Position after: 12.Qh5!*

12...Ndx5 [12...Qxe5+ 13.Be3± is simply very bad. The f7-pawn is hanging and White will quickly finish development by either castling queenside, or Bb5 and castling kingside.]  
 13.Nfxe6 Bxe6 14.Nxe6 Qe4+ 15.Be3



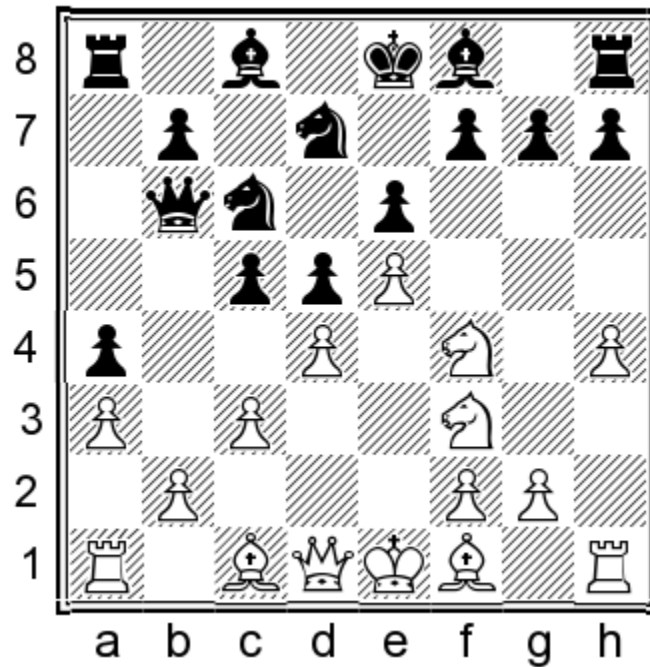
*Position after: 15.Be3*

Nc7 is the obvious threat and if Black tries to complicate matters with 15...d4 16.Nc7+ Kd8 17.Nxa8 dxe3, we have the strong 18.0-0-0+ Nd4 19.Rxd4+! Qxd4 20.Be2, with the idea of Rd1, keeping a strong attack.

## 10.h4

Aagaard and Ntirlis don't elaborate too much and focus on the move 10...h6



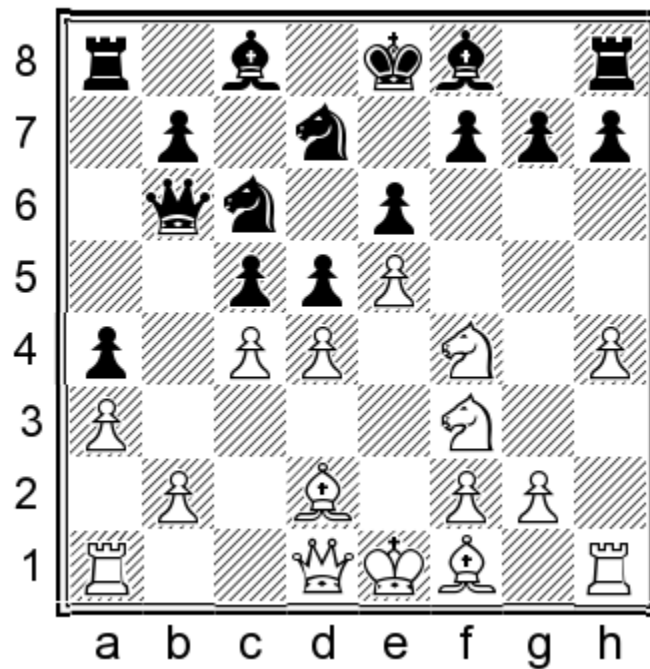


*Position after: 10.h4*

exclusively. Other options for Black need to be considered as well.

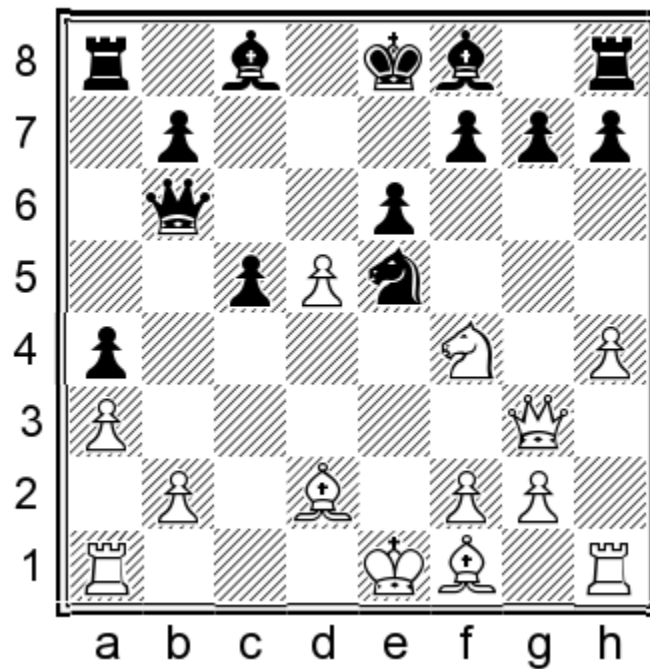
### **10...h6**

**A)** 10...Qa5 11.Bd2 Qb6 is Black's favorite way of disrupting White's coordination, but once again we are ready to attack in the center. 12.c4!



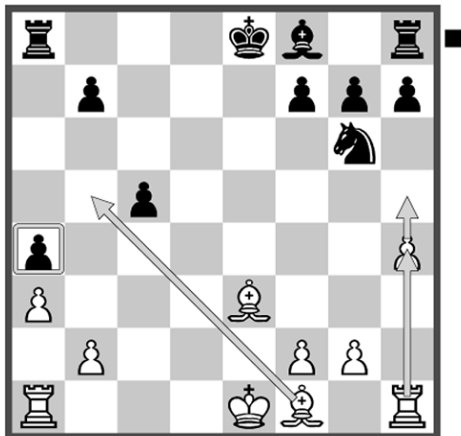
*Position after: 12.c4!*

12...Nxd4 [White's initiative is crushing in the case of 12...dxc4 13.d5!, e.g. 13...Ncxe5 14.dxe6 fxe6 15.Bc3± and the weaknesses on c4 and e6 will quickly start to fall while it is incredibly hard for Black to develop.] 13.cxd5 Nxf3+ 14.Qxf3 Nxe5 15.Qg3



*Position after: 15.Qg3*

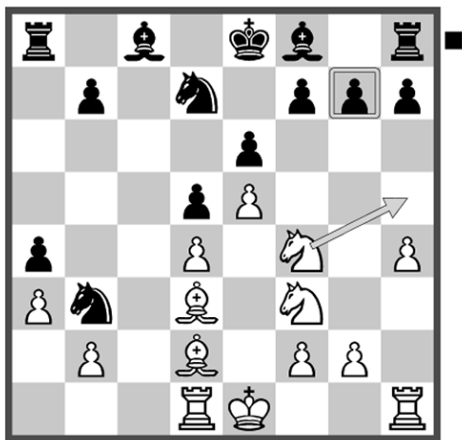
Black needs to tame White's attack and try to exchange some pieces, but the defender will be under pressure even in the endgame. 15...Ng6 16.dxe6 Bxe6 17.Nxe6 Qxe6+ 18.Qe3! It looks a bit paradoxical to offer the exchange of queens when White is the side with a material deficit, but Black will have trouble defending against White's bishop pair. 18...Qxe3+ 19.Bxe3



*Position after: 19.Bxe3*

Eventually Black will lose the a4-pawn to Bb5 and/or h5 and Rh4. They should evacuate their king from the center rather quickly otherwise White's bishops will become quite a nuisance. 19...Bd6 20.0-0-0 0-0-0 21.h5 Ne5 22.Rh4<sup>2</sup> After collecting the a4-pawn White will enjoy the stable bishop pair advantage.

**B)** Authors of the above-mentioned book were waiting for White to commit to Be2 and Rh3 before offering the queen swap on b3. It makes sense as after 10...Qb3 11.Qd3 cxd4 12.cxd4 Qxd3 13.Bxd3 White gains a lot of time because they took on d3 in one bishop move. 13...Na5 14.Bd2 Nb3 15.Rd1



*Position after: 15.Rd1*

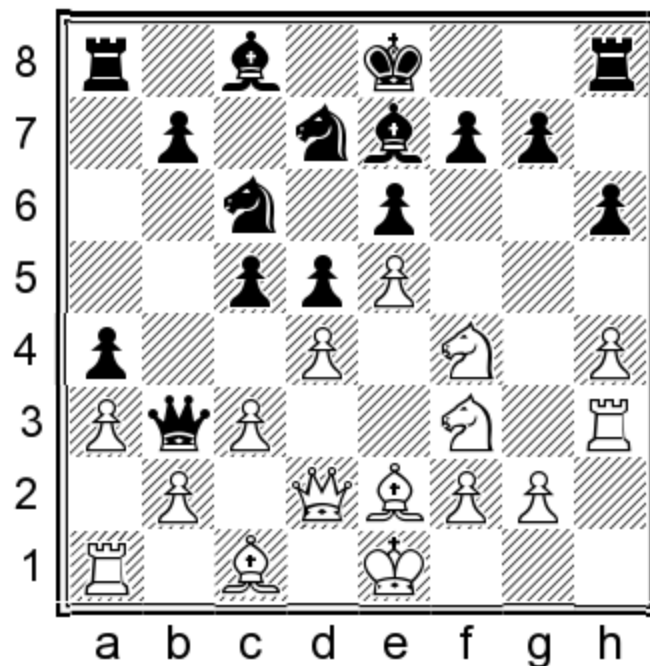
Although Black is able to take the bishop pair, their position will be a little cramped and they will have problems developing their kingside after a subsequent Nh5. 15...Nxd2 16.Rxd2 Nb6 17.Rc2 Simply taking the c4-square under control. 17...Bd7 18.Nh5<sup>2</sup> White can continue to mount the pressure with Rh3-g3.

### 11.Be2 Be7 12.Rh3 Qb3

According to Aagaard and Ntirlis White's queen has no good square now and they briefly analyze the endgame after Qd3.

My suggestion is to call their bluff with...

### 13.Qd2



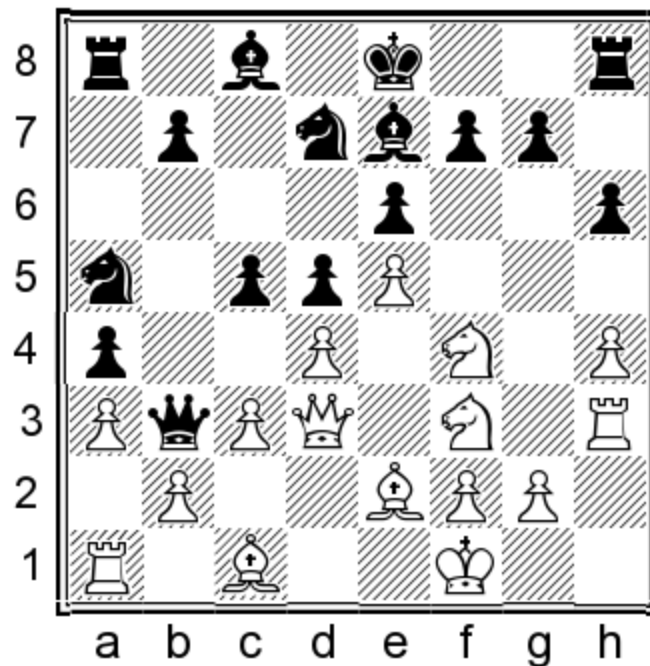
*Position after: 13.Qd2*

We can always make some room for our queen with Kf1 whereas Black's queen can only go back to b6.

### 13...Na5

**A)** 13...Qb6 is a silent draw offer which we turn down with 14.Kf1 Na5 15.Qd1 Qb3 This time the situation is a bit different. Thanks to Kf1 the queen has a nice square on e1-

too, but since the c6-knight has moved to a5, we can safely play 16.Qd3!

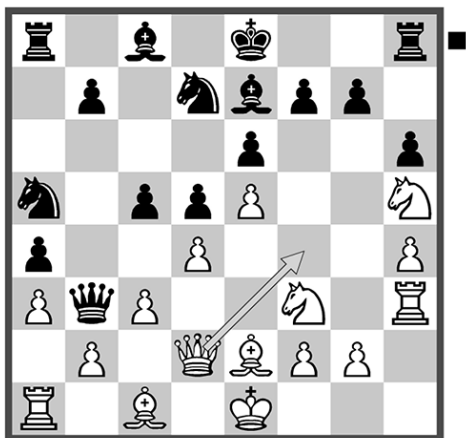


*Position after: 16.Qd3!*

exploiting the fact that 16...cxd4 runs into 17.Nxd4 Nxe5 18.Qg3!+- when both b3 and g7 are under attack.

**B)** 13...cxd4 14.Nxd4 Nxd4 15.cxd4± is also bad for Black.

**14.Nh5**



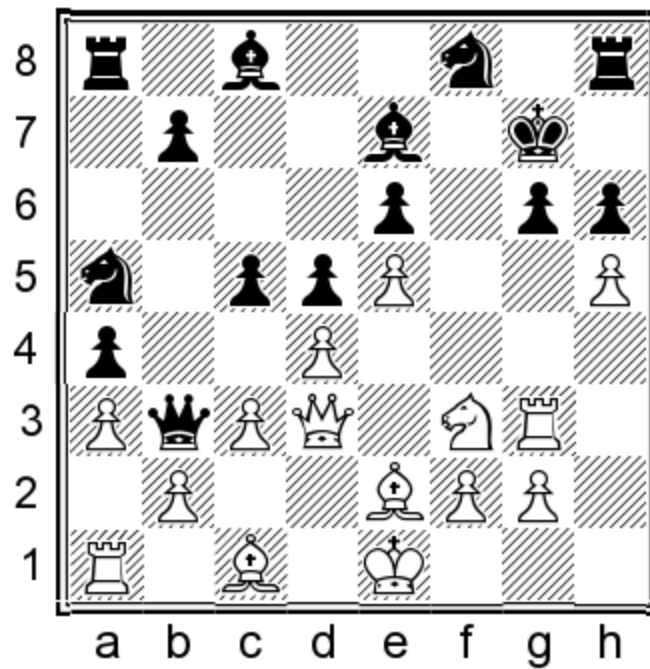
*Position after: 14.Nh5*

If Black defends passively then the queen has a nice square on f4. The principled 14...g6 is rather risky for Black though.

**15.Ng7+ Kf8 16.Nxe6+! fxe6 17.Qd3**

If Black loses the g6-pawn, they will eventually lose the whole kingside.

**17...Kg7 18.Rg3 Nf8 19.h5**

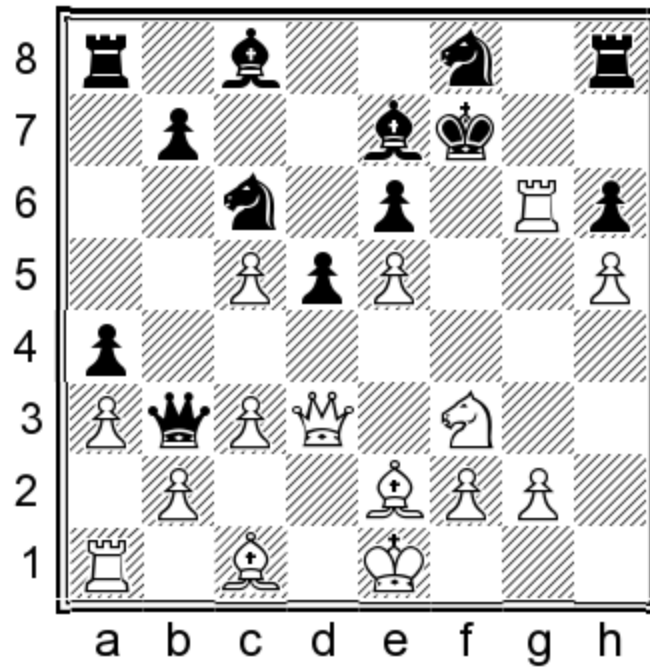


*Position after: 19.h5*

### **19...Nc6**

19...g5? runs into another sacrifice 20.Nxg5! hxg5 21.Bxg5 and Black will be checkmated. It is only logical as their strongest piece is stuck on b3. 21...Kf7 22.Qf3+ Ke8 23.Bxe7 Kxe7 24.Rg7+- 20.Rxg6+ Kf7 21.dxc5



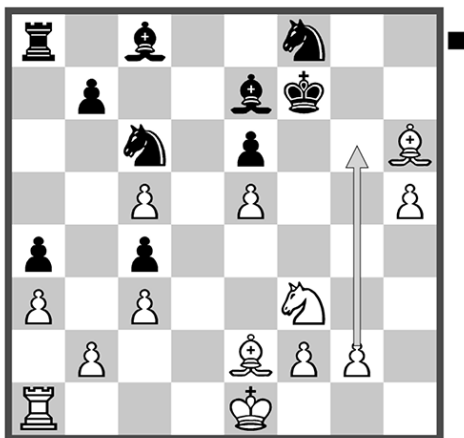


*Position after: 21.dxc5*

We'd like to clarify the situation in the center first and then take more pawns on the kingside with Rxh6. It is true that after 21...Qc4

Black will be able to exchange queens, but even after all their precise moves they will stand worse.

**22.Qxc4 dxc4 23.Rxh6 Rxh6 24.Bxh6<sup>2</sup>**



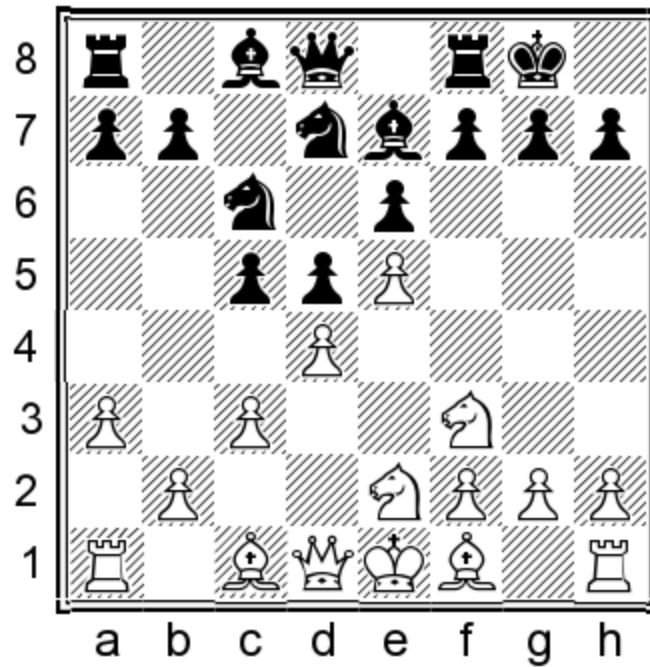
*Position after: 24.Bxh6<sup>2</sup>*

White's position is the more preferable one. They will capture the c4-pawn and while Black is collecting the c5 and e5-pawns, White will launch their pawn phalanx forward. After the exchanging of pawns, White will have three pawns for the piece and very nice coordination.

# Chapter 9

## 7...Be7 8.a3 0-0

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3  
Nc6 7.Nf3 Be7 8.a3 0-0



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 9 - 7...Be7 8.a3 0-0

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6  
7.Nf3 Be7 8.a3 0-0 9.Nf4 Qa5 10.Ra2

a) 10...cxd4

b) 10...Nxd4

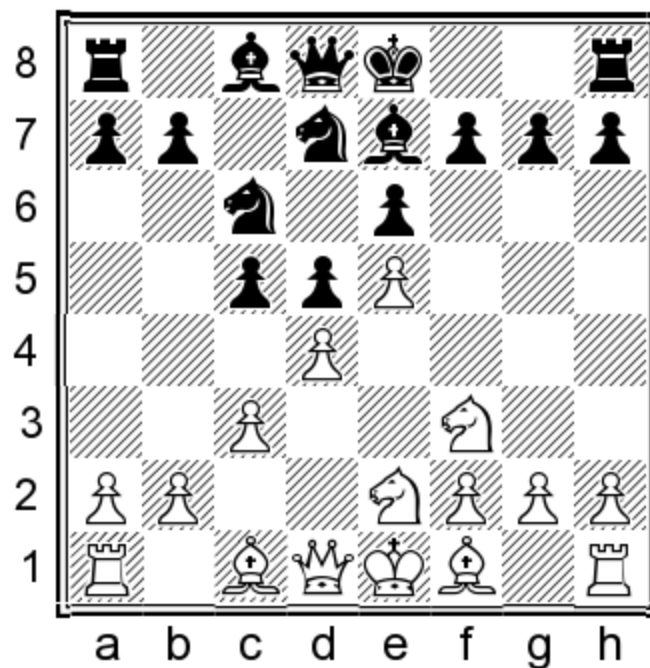
c) 10...c4

d) 10...a6

e) 10...b5

**a) 10...cxd4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3  
Nc6 7.Nf3 Be7**



*Position after: 7...Be7*

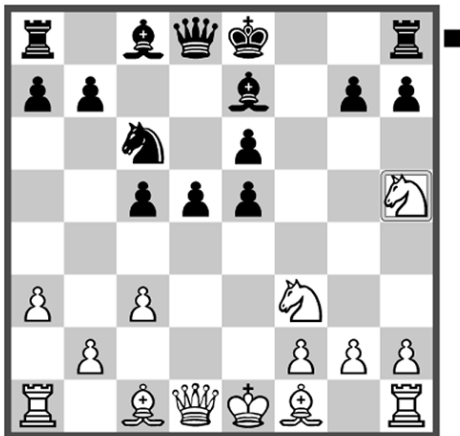
I considered many moves for White here and in the end I decided to recommend 8.a3

In many variations it is rather handy to have the b4-square under control for White, both to stop annoying ...Bb4 checks or to have the option of playing b4, grabbing more space on the queenside. We intend to continue developing the kingside with Nf4.

The immediate 8.Nf4 runs into 8...Qa5!, which is quite a typical move disrupting White's set-up. It forces White to move the c1-bishop due to the threat of ...cxd4 when White would not be able to recapture with the pawn. And after 9.Bd2, then ...Qb6! comes, hitting both the d4 and b2-pawns.

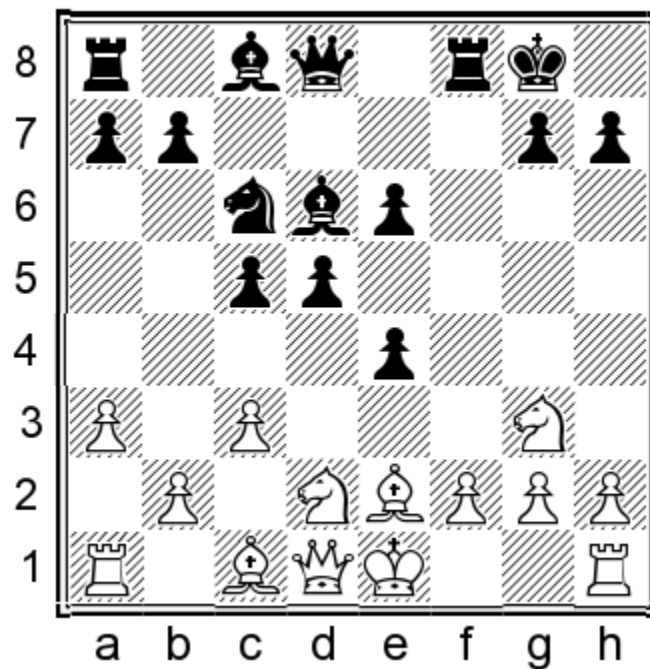
## 8...0-0

The undermining move 8...f6 did not work one move earlier and it is rather inefficient in the current position as well. We react in the usual fashion, forcing Black to sacrifice a piece on e5 thanks to the e6-square being under attack. 9.Nf4 Ndx e5 10.dxe5 fxe5 11.Nh5



*Position after: 11.Nh5*

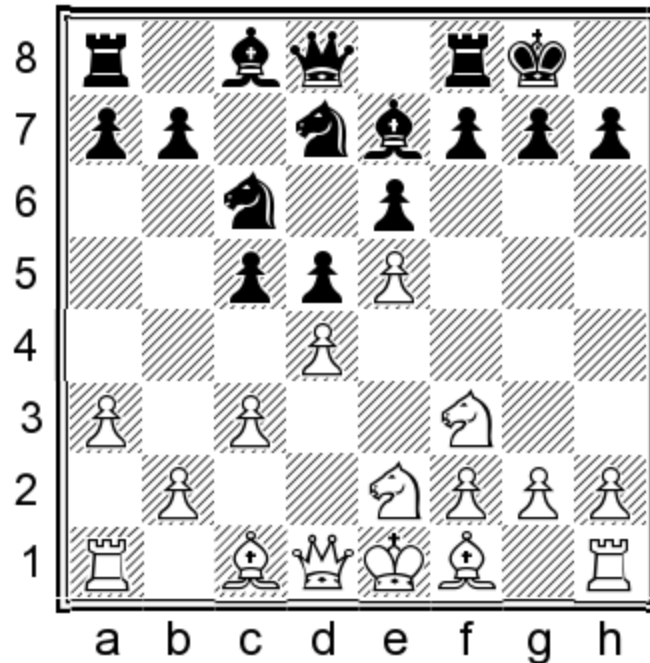
Note that the knight always goes to h5. The only exception is the early 7...f6 variation without including an exchange on d4 when we have a Nxe5 strike. 11...0-0 12.Be2 We develop calmly and will return our material advantage in exchange for positional benefits at the right time. 12...e4 13.Nd2 Bd6 14.Ng3



*Position after: 14.Ng3*

Black's central pawns are rather annoying so we are better advised to eliminate them even at the cost of a piece. We can count on the better pawn structure in the endgame instead. There is also a psychological aspect as well, as Black was hoping for a wild unbalanced game and has to defend a depressing worse position instead. 14...b6 15.Ndxe4!? dxe4 16.Nxe4 Bc7 17.Qxd8<sup>2</sup> White is running

close to no risk at all whereas Black needs to be really careful about their weak e-pawn.



*Position after: 8...0-0*

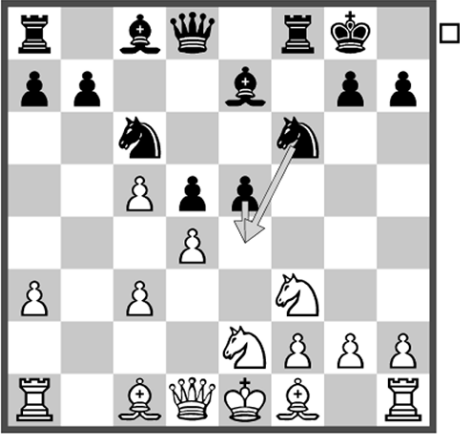
## 9.Nf4

If Black doesn't do anything special here we can just build our favorite set-up with Bd3 and h4 and start to threaten the kingside with brutal strikes like Bxh7+.

### A) 9.b4

**A1)** Black normally delays the exchange on d4 because they want to keep the d4-square under more control than in variations like 9...cxd4 10.cxd4 f6 11.b5 Ncxe5 12.dxe5 fxe5, where a pawn on c5 would have been quite handy as it would be covering the d4-square after ...e4.

**A2)** 9...f6! If White neglects their development even more, Black can start opening the center immediately. After 10.exf6 Nxf6 11.bxc5 e5!



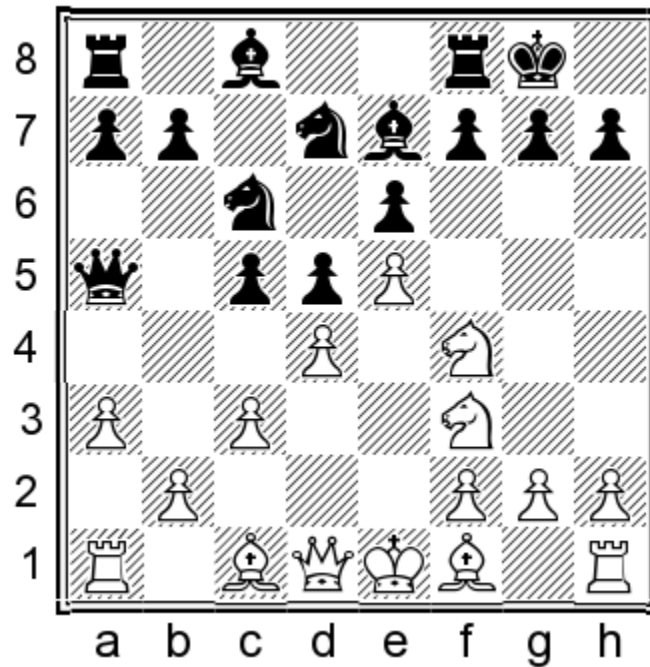
*Position after: 11...e5!*

they are already opening lines against White's king. Black has managed to mobilize most of their forces while White has only developed two knights so far. It looks incredibly dangerous for White.

**B)** 9.h4 cxd4 10.cxd4 f6 is a pretty similar story to 9.b4.

**9...Qa5!**





*Position after: 9...Qa5!*

Only this move is difficult to meet as it hampers White's otherwise smooth plan. Now capturing on d4 is a threat. We need to get rather creative in order to fight for an edge here.

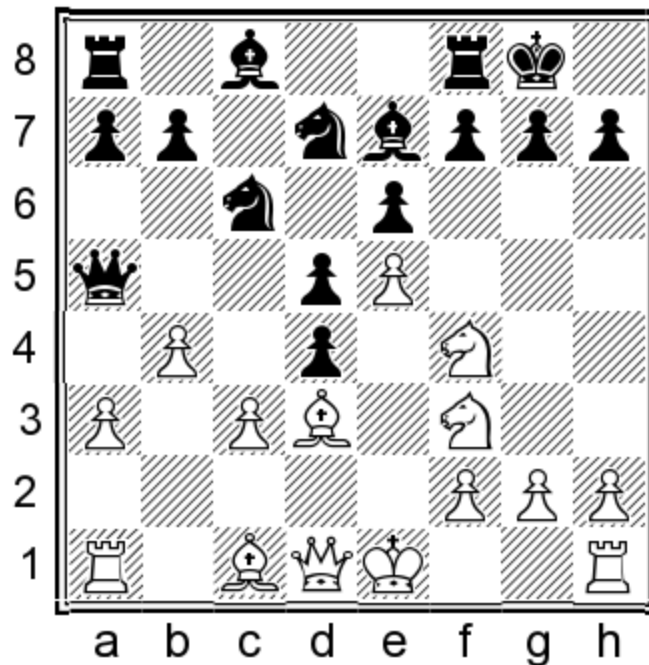
## 10.Ra2!

The idea of this move is rather deep. White removes the rook from possible ...Qc3+ attacks and in doing so prepares the move Bd3. It also gives White the option of Rd2 in case of ...Nxd4, Nxd4 and b4. Let's delve into the variations now and see the differences in comparison with White's other options on move 10.

**A)** 10.Bd2 defends against the annoying ...cxd4 but since the bishop is not defending b2 anymore, White loses control after 10...Qb6, when they cannot defend both d4 and b2 at the same time. 11.Be3 Qxb2 12.Rb1 Qxc3+

13.Bd2 Qxa3 14.Ra1 Qb2 15.Rb1= There is no way of trapping the black queen and White has to be content with a draw as they are already three pawns down.

**B)** It would be great if White could play 10.Bd3 cxd4

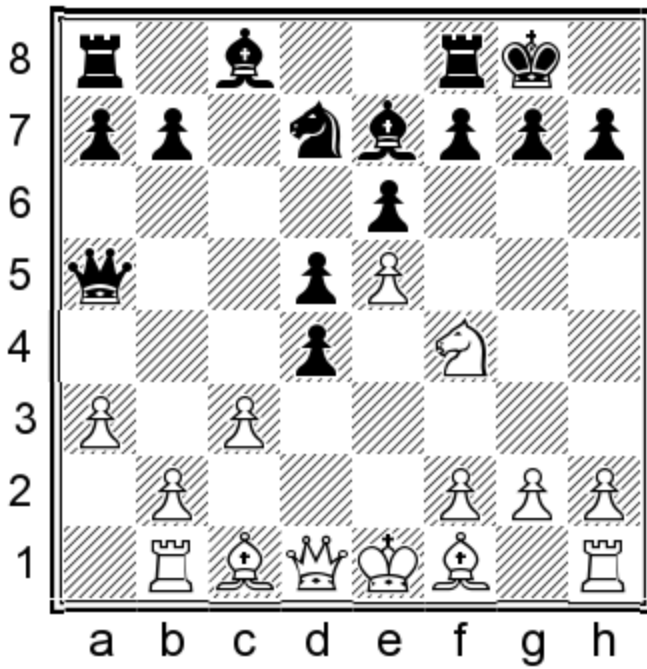


11.b4,

*Position after: 11.b4*

but Black has a nasty trick 11...Qc7 12.cxd4 Nxd4!  
13.Nxd4 Qc3+ when both the d4-knight and the a1-rook are under attack. One starts to wonder whether White could put the rook to a better place instead...

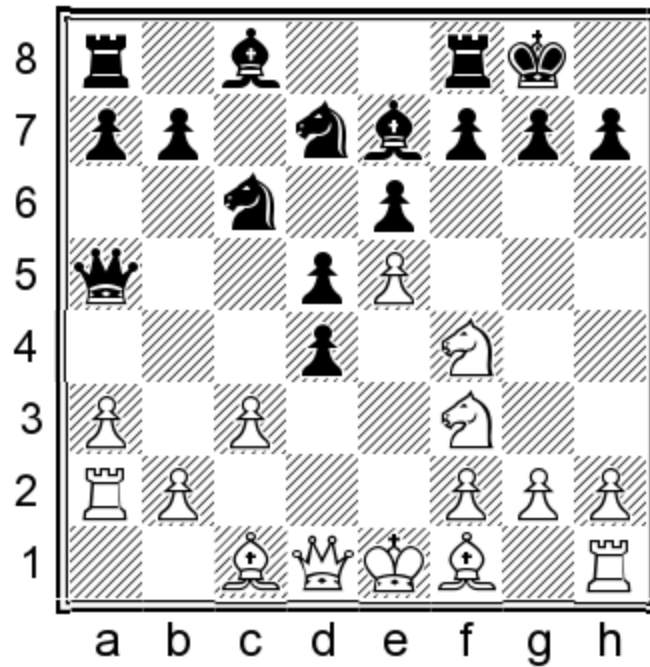
**C)** There is only one problem with 10.Rb1 and that is 10...Nxd4! 11.Nxd4 cxd4 when after



*Position after: 11...cxd4*

12.b4 Qc7 13.cxd4 Qc3+ White has to agree to exchange queens with Qd2 because 14.Bd2? -+ loses the d-pawn.

**10...cxd4**



*Position after: 10...cxd4*

This is a very direct approach trying to open up the position immediately. We kick the queen away from the a5-e1 diagonal and then play all the natural pawn captures.

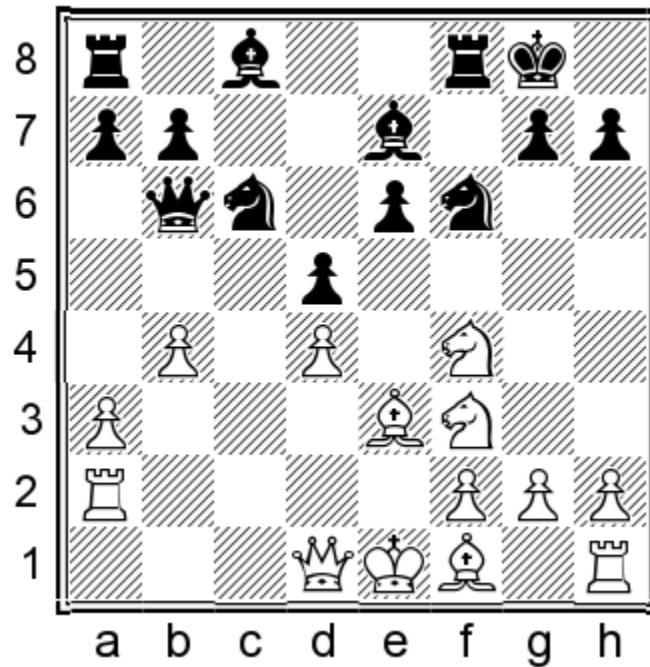
### **11.b4 Qb6**

This is the most logical spot retreat square as Black would like to question White's position with ...f6 and ...a5, so the queen is quite useful for generating pressure on the b4-pawn.

### **12.cxd4 f6 13.exf6 Nxf6**

13...Bxf6 embarrasses the d7-knight which does not have a good square after 14.Be3. Also the bishop has moved away from the e7-a3 diagonal so the counterstrike ...a5 will not have as much power now.

## 14.Be3

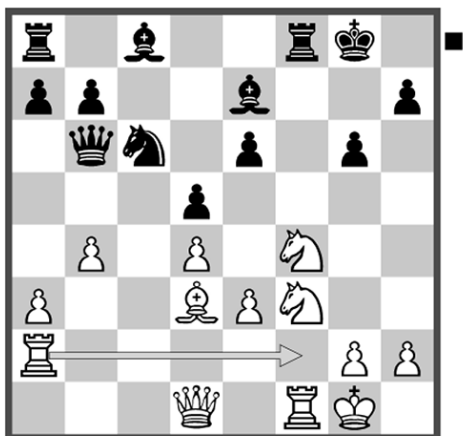


*Position after: 14.Be3*

## 14...Ne4

This has a rather curious tactical idea in mind.

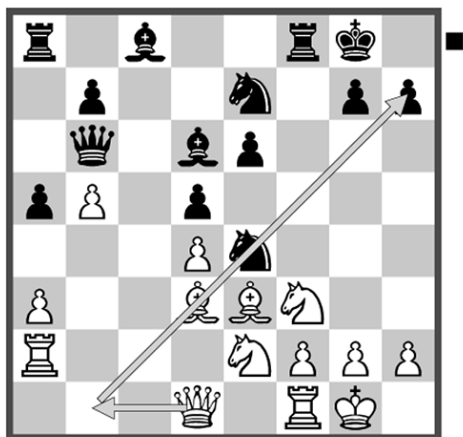
**A)** White does not really mind having their center reinforced after 14...Ng4 15.Bd3 as the light-squared bishop is much more important. White will complete development with castling, say 15...g6 16.0-0, and if Black does capture on e3 16...Nxe3 17.fxe3



*Position after: 17.fxe3*

then we can make great use of the Ra2 maneuver once again by doubling the rooks on the f-file with Raf2.

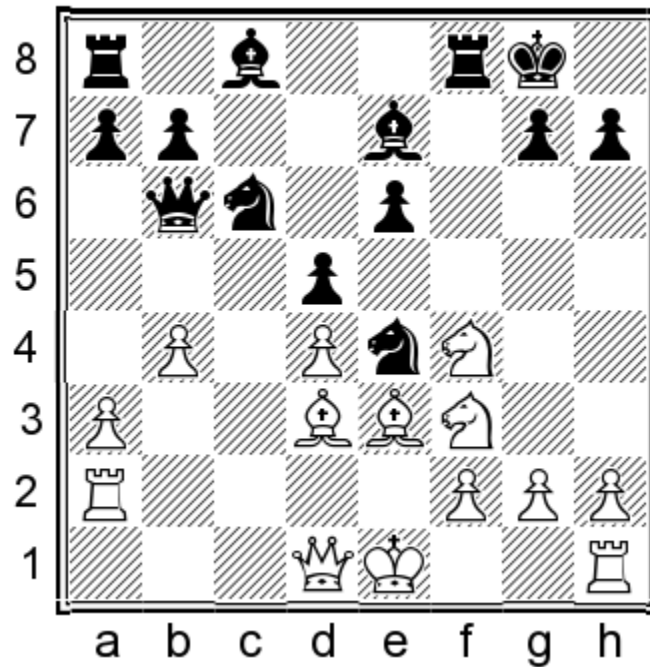
**B)** 14...Bd6 fails to create the same level of complications as 14...Ne4 does, and after 15.Bd3 Ne4 16.Ne2 a5 17.b5 White manages to get their king to safety after 17...Ne7 18.0-0.



*Position after: 18.0-0*

The e4-knight might be in trouble after a subsequent Qb1 or Qc2, and if White manages to capture on e4 then Black's structure will be permanently damaged.

## 15.Bd3



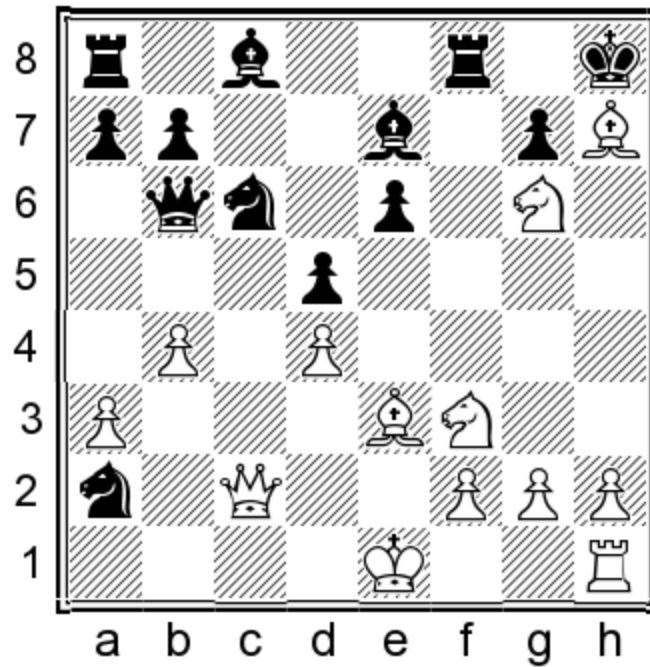
*Position after: 15.Bd3*

## 15...Rxf4!?

This is not a real exchange sacrifice as Black will win it back straight away with ...Nc3.

**A)** 15...Bd6 16.Ne2 transposes and is analyzed via the 14...Bd6 move order.

**B)** Forking White's pieces with 15...Nc3? immediately does not work because Black's king will be massacred after 16.Qc2 Nxa2 17.Bxh7+ Kh8 18.Ng6+!.

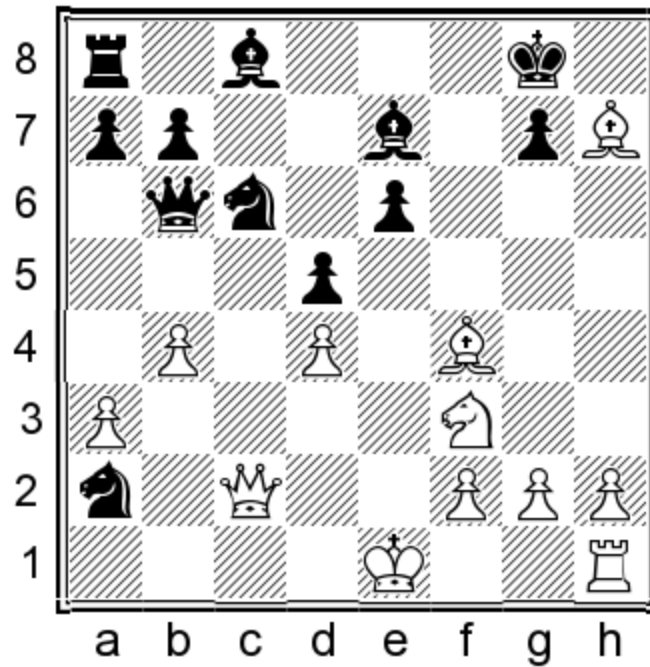


*Position after: 18.Ng6+!*

Now it will be painfully obvious to Black why they should have captured the f4-knight first. 18...Kxh7 19.Nxe7+ Kh8 20.Ng6++- and White's knight captures everything.

**16.Bxf4 Nc3 17.Qc2 Nxa2 18.Bxh7+!**





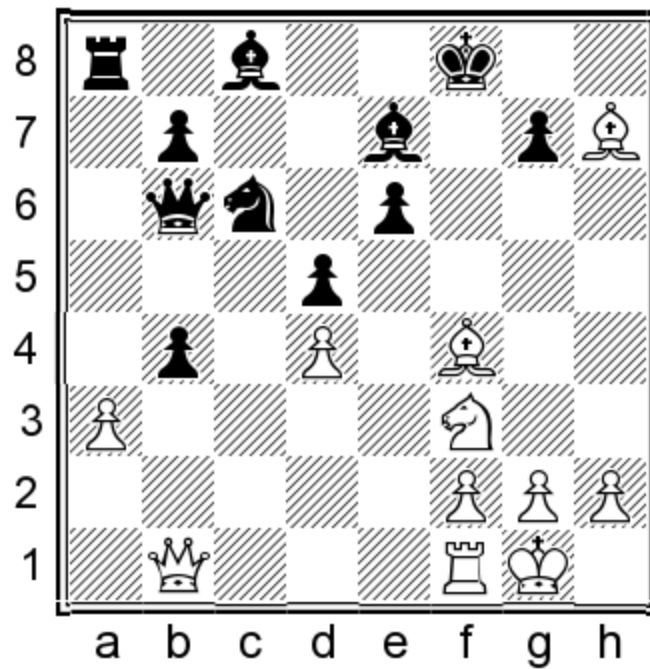
*Position after: 18.Bxh7+!*

Black's king is obliged to run so that it is not checkmated. Even so Black will create a lot of counterplay with ...a5, so the position is not absolutely clear at first sight.

### **18...Kf8**

18...Kh8? loses to 19.Qg6! with the devastating threat of Qh5, e.g. 19...Nxd4 20.Qh5 Nxf3+ 21.gxf3 and Black cannot stop the queen and bishop tandem. 21...e5 22.Bg6+ Kg8 23.Qh7+ Kf8 24.Qh8#

**19.Qxa2 a5 20.0-0 axb4 21.Qb1!**



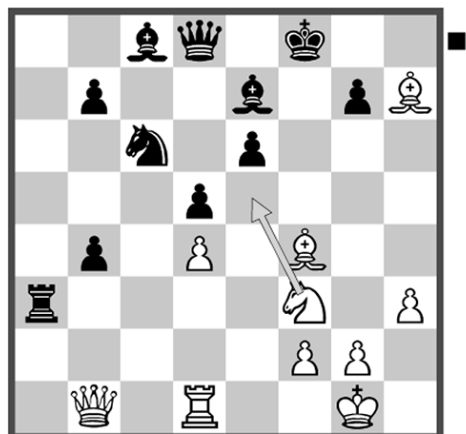
*Position after: 21.Qb1!*

Here White should focus on Black's king. Black's extra pawn on the queenside does not really matter as the play will revolve around the kingside.

**21...Rxa3 22.Rd1 Rxf3!?**

This violent exchange sacrifice is preferred by engines.

After the calmer 22...Qd8 we first improve our position with

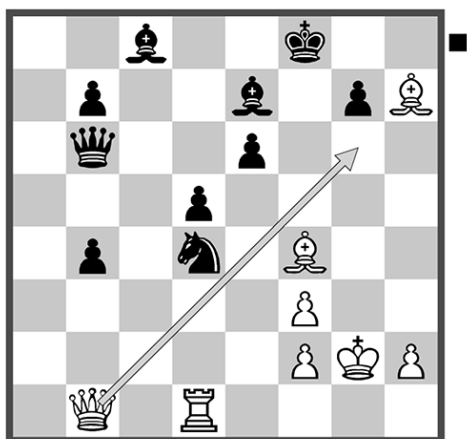


23.h3<sup>2</sup>,

*Position after: 23.h3<sup>2</sup>*

securing our king against any nasty back rank combinations, and then continue the onslaught with Ne5. We can afford to play a bit slowly here because Black's weak king position is a long-term issue.

**23.gxf3 Nxd4 24.Kg2<sup>2</sup>**



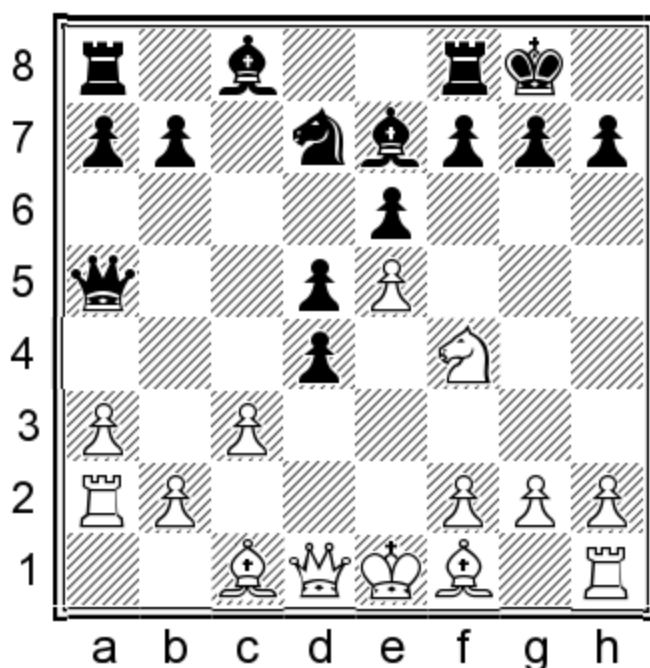
*Position after: 24.Kg2<sup>2</sup>*

However, after the dust settles it is clear that this position is far from being pleasant for Black. We will send our queen

to the kingside with Qg6, and although Black has a lot of pawns for the sacrificed exchange, their king's vulnerability is still an issue.

**b) 10...Nxd4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3  
Nc6 7.Nf3 Be7 8.a3 0-0 9.Nf4 Qa5 10.Ra2 Nxd4  
11.Nxd4 cxd4**

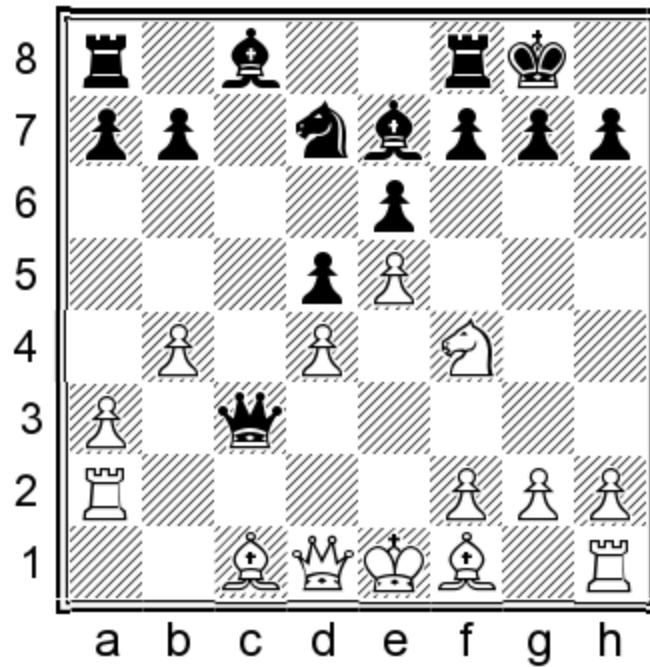


*Position after: 11...cxd4*

is similar to the 10...cxd4 line in some aspects, yet there are some key differences. The evaluation, however, remains the same; White's position is the slightly easier one to play.

**12.b4 Qb6**

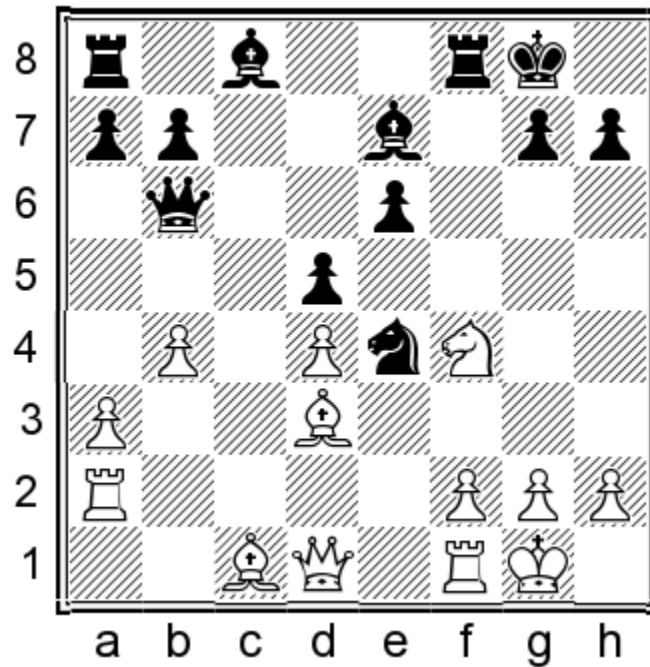
**12...Qc7 13.cxd4 Qc3+**



*Position after: 13...Qc3+*

Here we can see the difference between 10.Rb1 and our preference of 10.Ra2, as we have the option of 14.Rd2!, when White keeps everything under control and has a great game after 14...Nb6 15.Bd3. Note that 15...Nc4? is ill-advised due to 16.Ne2 Qa1 17.0-0! Nxd2 18.Qxd2+- when Black's queen will be trapped after a subsequent Bb2 and Nc1.

**13.cxd4 f6 14.exf6 Nxf6 15.Bd3 Ne4 16.0-0**



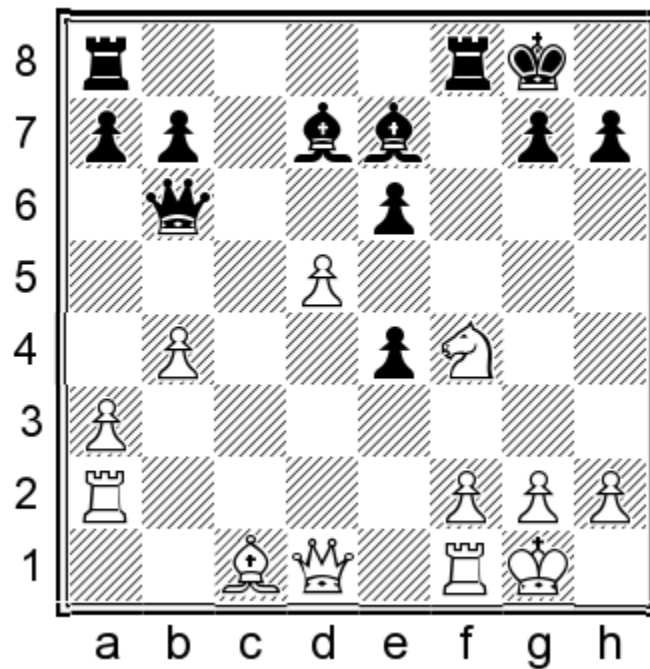
*Position after: 16.0-0*

In comparison with the 10...cxd4 variation Black is unable to throw this position into such disarray and White is able to claim a stable advantage.

### **16...Bd6**

Otherwise White will be able to damage Black's pawn structure.

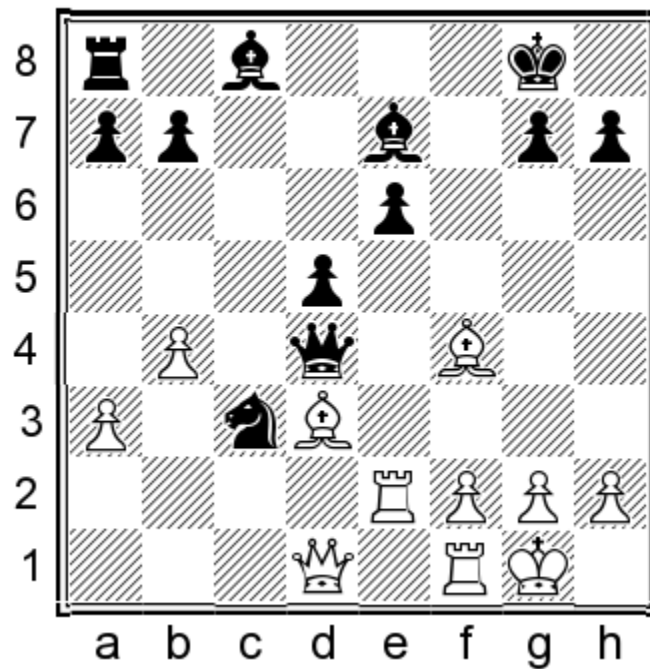
**A)** 16...Bd7 17.Bxe4 dxe4 18.d5!



*Position after: 18.d5!*

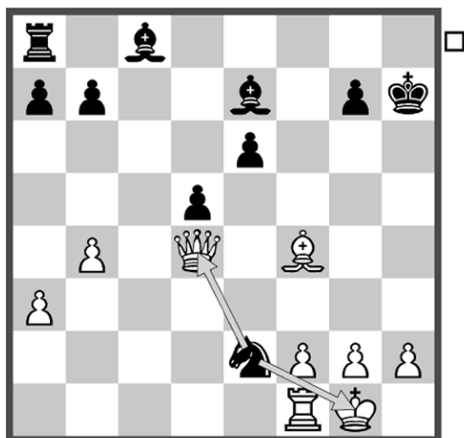
is a very nice continuation. After 18...e5 19.Ne6 Bxe6 20.dxe6 Qxe6 21.Re2<sup>2</sup> White will pick up the e4-pawn and slowly begin besieging e5 with Rfe1 and Bb2.

**B)** 16...Qxd4 17.Re2! will either be a similar story to 16...Bd7 after White damages Black's pawn structure with Bxe4 and starts going after Black's e-pawns, or Black can choose the forcing 17...Rxf4 [17...Nc3?? 18.Bxh7++- loses the queen] 18.Bxf4 Nc3



*Position after: 18...Nc3*

19.Be5 [19.Bxh7+?? Kxh7 20.Qxd4 Nxe2+-+

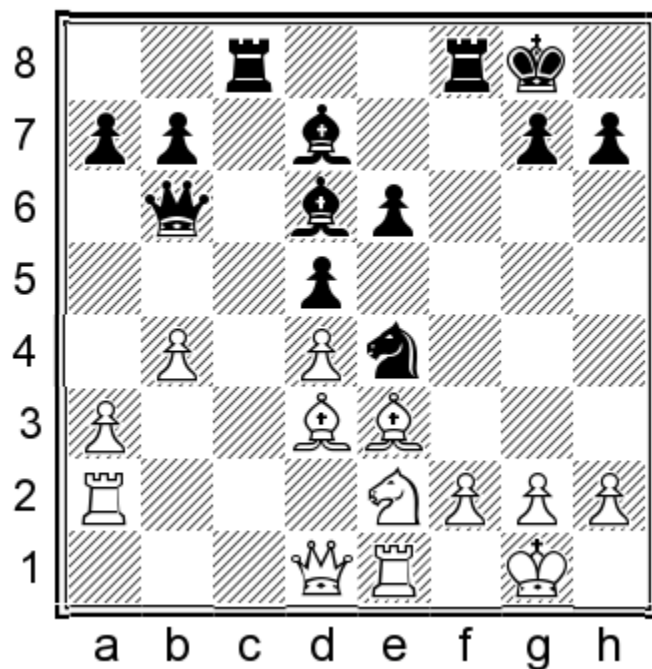


*Position after: 20...Nxe2+-+*

is bad for White now as the f4-knight is not there to cover e2 anymore.] 19...Qxe5 20.Rxe5 Nxd1 21.Rxd1. Black will suffer the exchange down.



**17.Ne2 Bd7 18.Be3 Rac8 19.Re1**

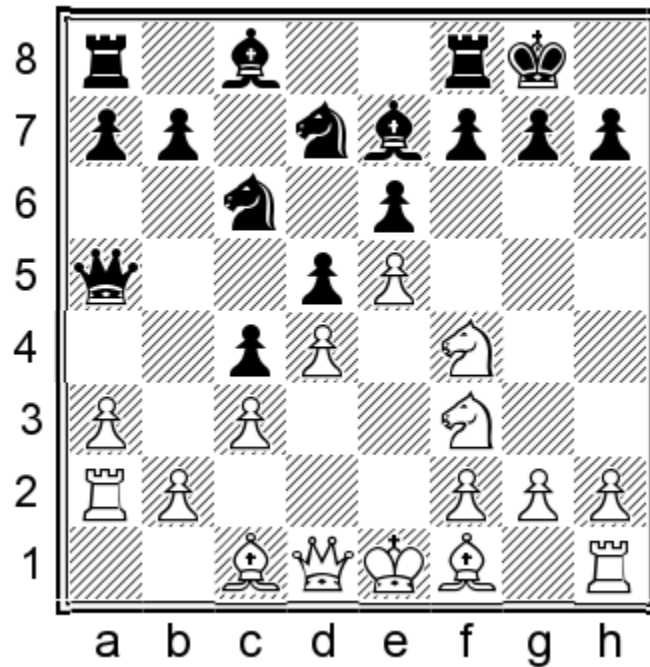


*Position after: 19.Re1*

White will choose a suitable moment to capture the e4-knight and damage Black's pawns, possibly targeting the newly created weakness with Ng3.

**c) 10...c4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 Be7 8.a3 0-0 9.Nf4 Qa5 10.Ra2 c4**



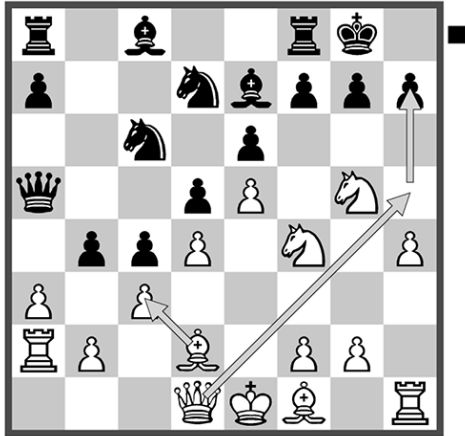
*Position after: 10...c4*

This makes some sense as White's a2-rook is now caged in. At the same time Black needs to create some counterplay after White starts attacking their kingside. And so Black's strategy (both to block the queenside and start counterplay there at the same time) is a little contradictory.

**11.h4!**

White immediately shifts focus to Black's king.

**11...b5 12.Ng5 b4 13.Bd2!**

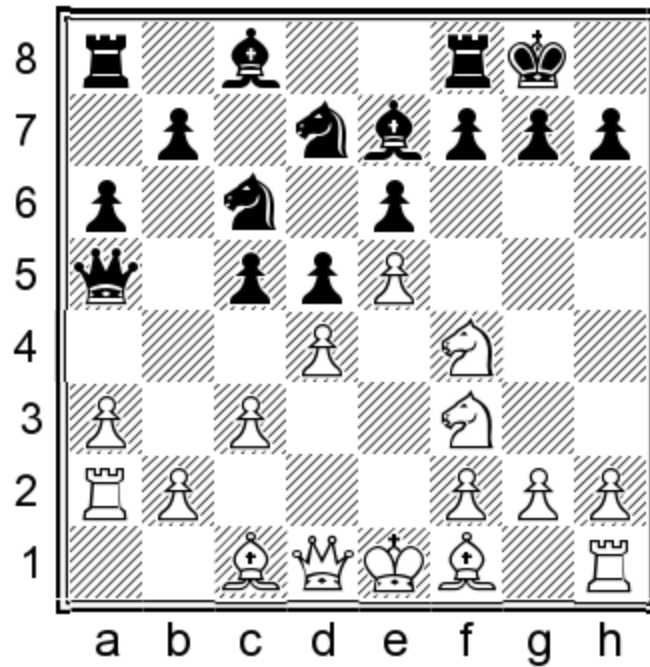


*Position after: 13.Bd2!*

This is nipping Black's counterplay in the bud as the bishop is ready to capture on c3 and then White will continue their attack with Qh5 or the surprising 13...bxa3 14.Qb1! when it is suddenly very difficult to defend the h7-square.

**d) 10...a6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 Be7 8.a3 0-0 9.Nf4 Qa5 10.Ra2 a6**

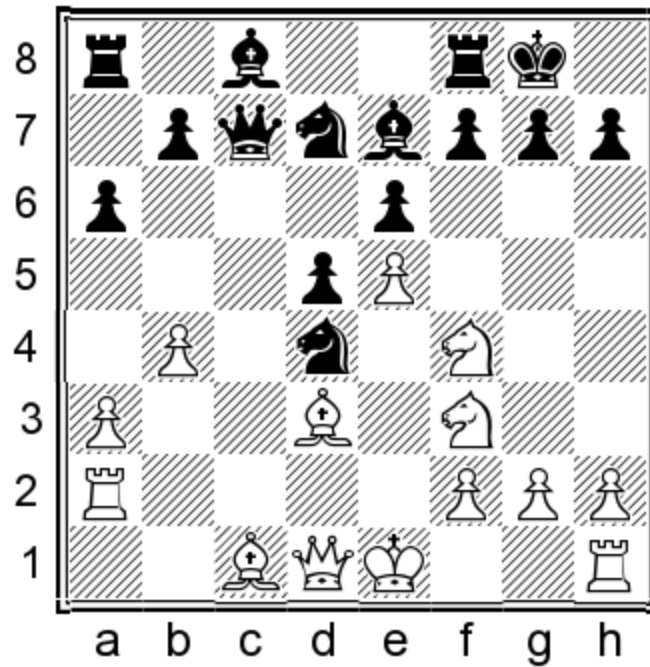


*Position after: 10...a6*

Let us have a quick look at this innocuous move too so that we can show another idea of Ra2. Here White develops with 11.Bd3

Now Black cannot play as he did after 10.Bd3, let's see why.

**11...cxd4 12.b4 Qc7 13.cxd4 Nxd4?**

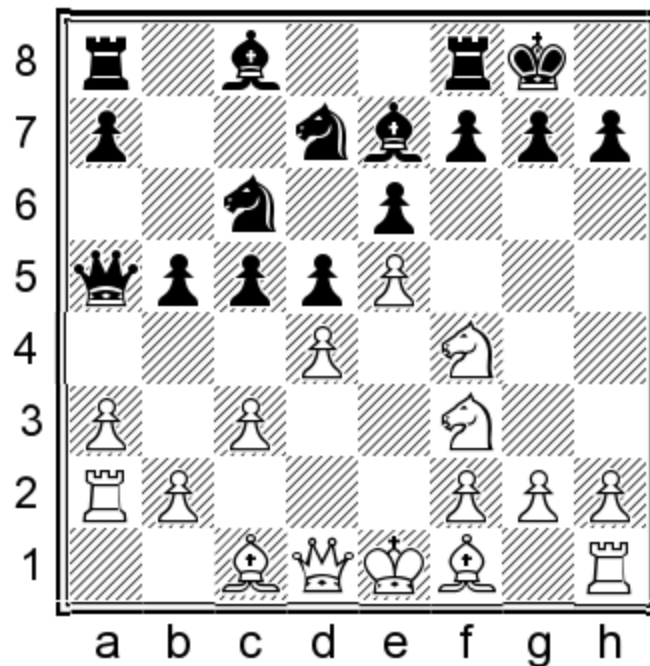


*Position after: 13...Nxd4?*

**14.Nxd4 Qc3+ 15.Kf1!+-** White's rook is no longer under attack as it is now on the a2-square, and **15...Qxd4** fails to **16.Bxh7+!+-**.

**e) 10...b5**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.Nce2 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Nf3 Be7 8.a3 0-0 9.Nf4 Qa5 10.Ra2 b5**



*Position after: 10...b5*

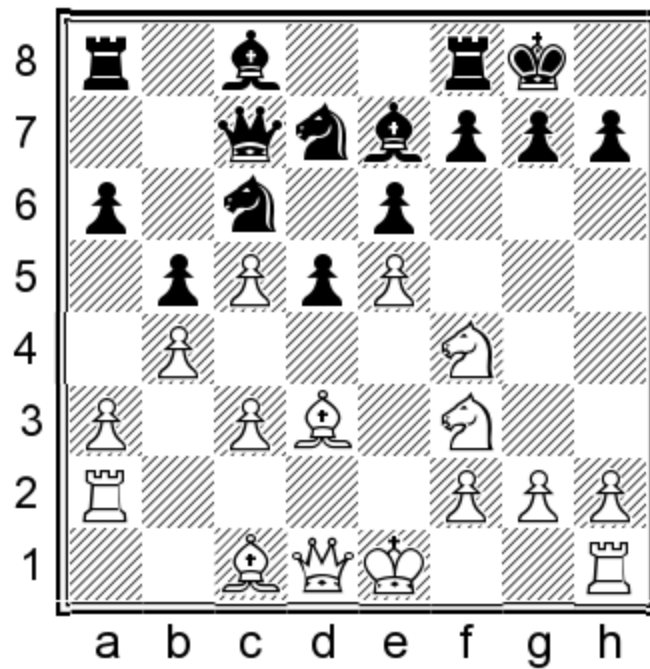
Here we change the pawn structure quite a bit.

### **11.dxc5 Qc7**

**A)** The c5-pawn is taboo because 11...Nxc5? loses a piece after 12.b4+-.

**B)** Black also refrains from 11...Ndx5?! as after 12.b4 they have to make some really awkward move such as ...Qa6 or ...Qa4 in order to defend the b5-pawn.

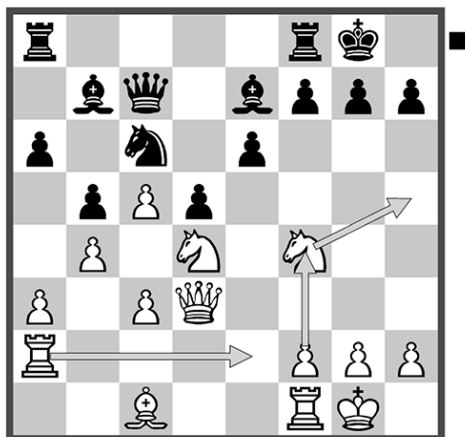
### **12.b4 a6 13.Bd3**



*Position after: 13.Bd3*

Unfortunately, we are unable to protect the e5-pawn sufficiently, so Black will be able to restore the material balance. However, our pieces will enjoy more space and the passed c5-pawn could cause problems down the line.

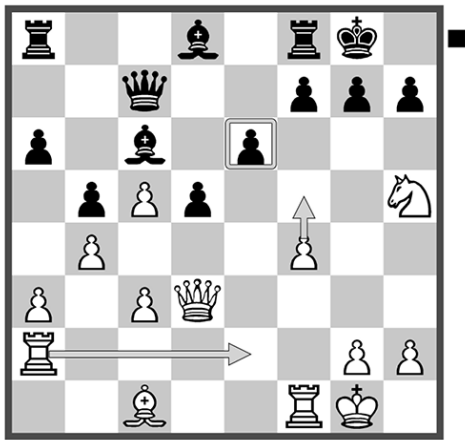
**13...Ndx e5 14.0-0 Nxd3 15.Qxd3 Bb7 16.Nd4**



*Position after: 16.Nd4*

We'd like to reinforce our control over the position with Re2, Nh5, and f4, establishing a bind on the e5-square. If Black somehow manages to miraculously open the position with ...e5 and breathe some life into their b7-bishop then they would be able to solve their problems, so we must be careful not to allow them to do so, e.g.

**16...Bf6 17.Nxc6 Bxc6 18.Nh5 Bd8 19.f4**



*Position after: 19.f4*

We intend to play Re2 next and ideas like f5-f6 also start coming to mind. If Black decides to counter such ideas with ...f6 then a weakness on e6 emerges.



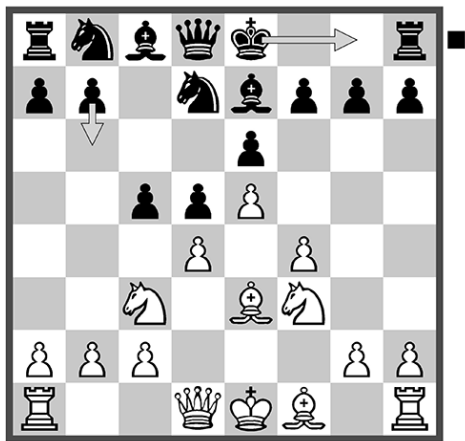
## **Part V**

**3...Nf6 4.e5 & 5.f4**

# Chapter 10

## ...Be7 without ...Nc6

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Be7  
7.Be3**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 10 - ...Be7 without ...Nc6

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Be7  
7.Be3

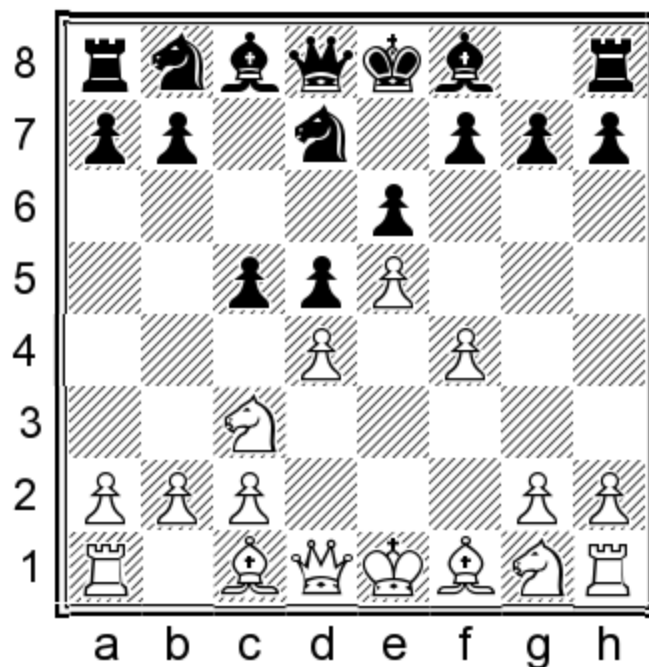
a) 7...0-0

b) 7...b6 & 9...a5

c) 7...b6 & 9...cxd4

**a) 7...0-0**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5**



*Position after: 5...c5*

Compared to the 5.Nce2 system, White is employing a much more direct and principled approach here. They do

not mind trading a bit of their central control in exchange for quick development – the fight tends to be much more fierce and open.

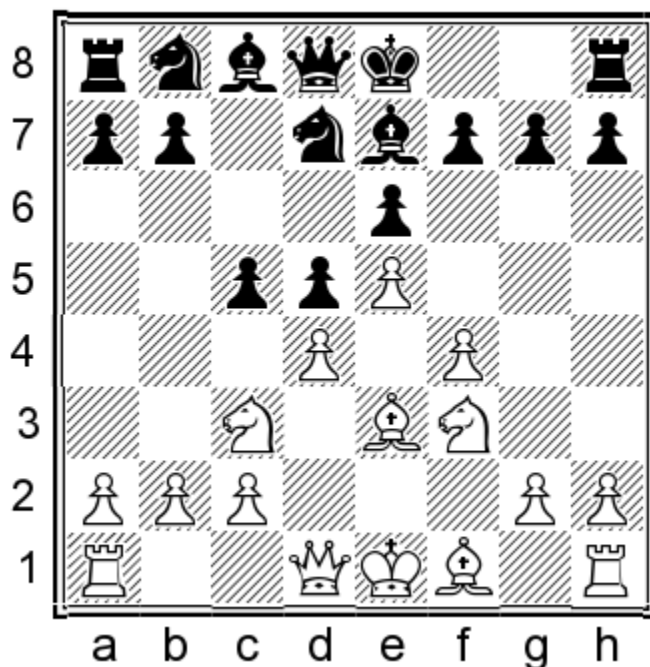
### 6.Nf3

We shall start by investigating the ...Be7 set-up which is, in a way, the simplest and at the same time the most natural way of developing Black's pieces. Then we will gradually move on to more sophisticated set-ups.

### 6...Be7

This can be considered an independent attempt too as long as Black continues delaying ...Nc6. It is difficult to get by without such a natural move though.

### 7.Be3



*Position after: 7.Be3*

In principle Black can try either the ...b6 or ...a6 push. Capturing on d4 makes little sense, as in such scenarios Black usually prefers not to commit their dark-squared bishop so soon, as we will see in following chapters.

### **7...0-0**

**A)** 7...Nc6 transposes into 6...Nc6.

**B)** 7...a6 8.Qd2 is analyzed either via the 7...0-0 move order or simply transposes as well after 8...Nc6.

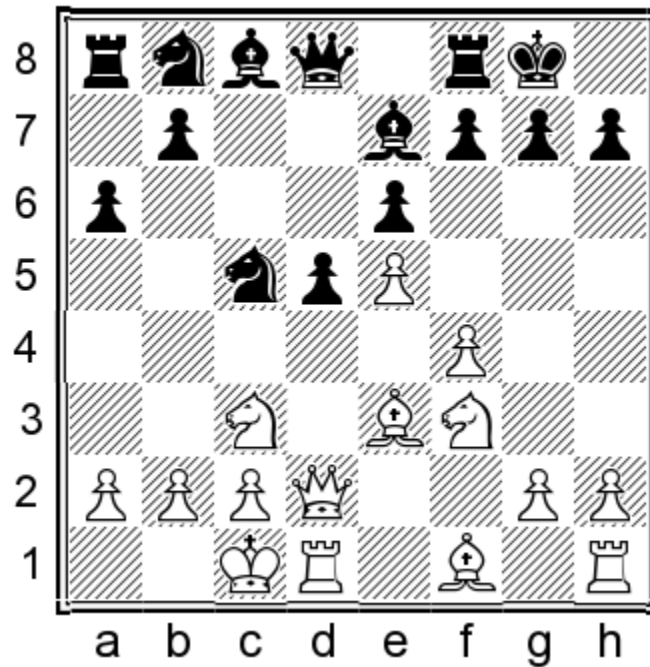
### **8.Qd2 a6**

Here we apply the same treatment as we will in the mainline, giving Black a chance for redemption by letting them transpose into the most principled set-up.

### **9.dxc5 Nxc5**

It is hard to imagine how Black can avoid playing ...Nc6, unless they recapture with the other knight on c5 first, and therefore we will be focusing on original ideas only.

### **10.0-0-0**

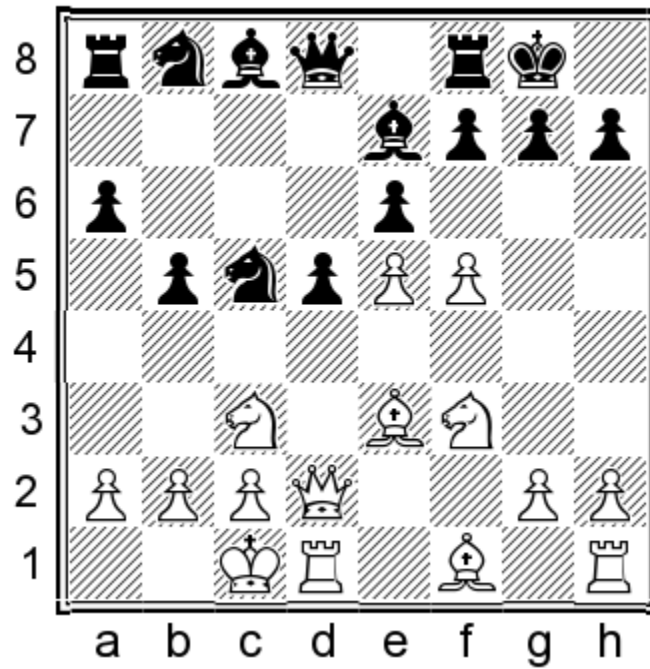


*Position after: 10.0-0-0*

### **10...Nbd7**

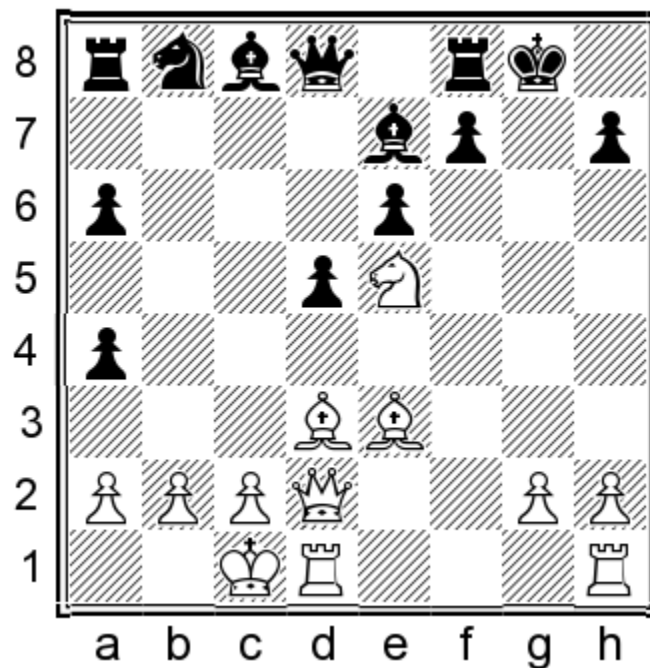
**A)** As always, 10...Nc6 is the best here and the ensuing tabiya will be analyzed in the next chapter. You can compare our recommendation from 10...Nbd7 with 11.f5 exf5 12.Nxd5 Be6!∞ when it is clear Black is much better placed for this pawn push with the queen's knight not obstructing their bishop's path.

**B)** It is worth noting that 10...b5 does not have much sting. White's attack will be significantly stronger after 11.f5!.



*Position after: 11.f5!*

**B1)** 11...Na4 turns out to be quite dangerous for Black as well after 12.Nxa4 bxa4 13.f6! gxf6 14.Bd3 fxe5 15.Nxe5

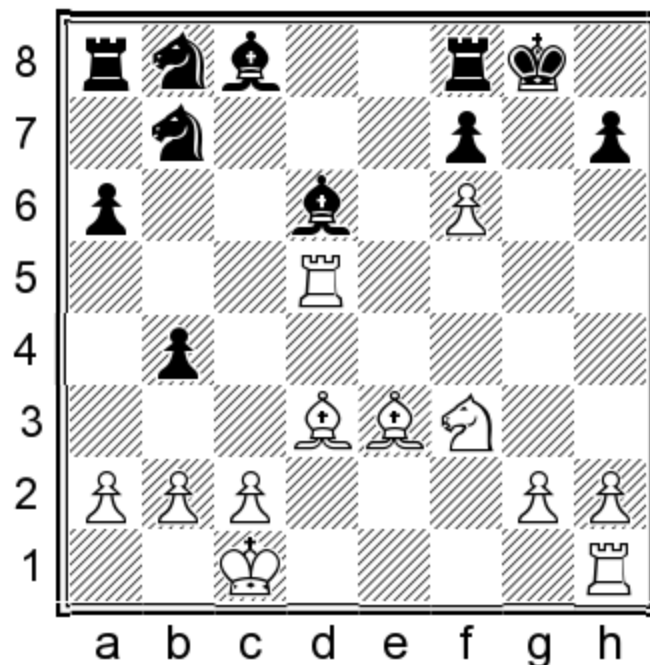


*Position after: 15.Nxe5*

when White has plenty of compensation in the form of an attack against the exposed black monarch, for example 15...f6? 16.Bxh7+! Kxh7 17.Qd3+ f5 18.g4, and with accurate play Black will not be able to survive much longer.

**B2)** 11...b4 12.Nxd5! makes nice tactical use of the fact that the e7-bishop will be overloaded after f5-f6.

12...Qxd5 [12...exd5 is probably even worse after 13.f6 gxf6 14.exf6 Bd6 15.Qxd5+-] 13.Qxd5 exd5 14.f6 gxf6 15.exf6 Bd6 16.Rxd5 Nb7 Now there are multiple ways White can continue developing their initiative; I like the direct 17.Bd3!?. Though it is true that White has only two pawns for the sacrificed piece, matters will soon become clear.

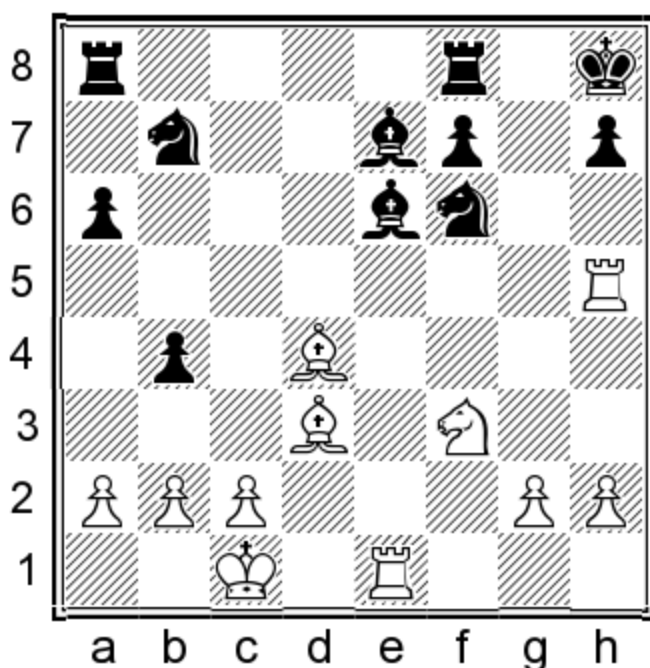


*Position after: 17.Bd3!?*



**B2.1)** 17...Re8? does not really solve the threat of 18.Rh5! because after 18...Rxe3 19.Bxh7+ Kf8 20.Bf5± White regains one of the pieces and, with already three pawns compensating for the second sacrificed piece, and a continuing attack, there is little doubt their compensation is more than sufficient.

**B2.2)** 17...Nd7 18.Rh5! The following sequence is forced. 18...Nxf6 19.Rg5+ Kh8 20.Bd4 Be7 21.Re1 Be6 [21...Bd8? 22.Ne5+–, threatening the simple maneuver Ne5-c6, is just winning.] 22.Rh5 Black is losing an important pawn on h7 and with their king being so weak and their piece coordination being close to



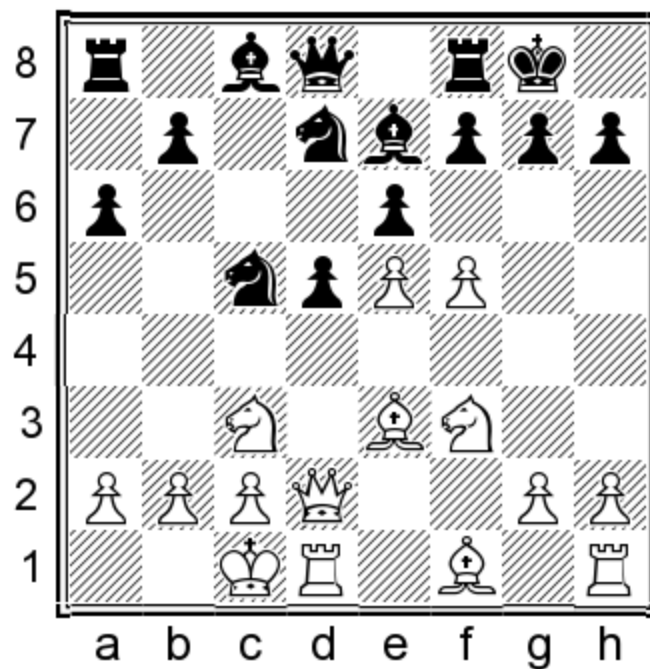
*Position after: 22.Rh5*

non-existent White will recover the rest of their investment very soon, e.g. 22...Kg8 23.Rh6± Kg7? 24.Rxh7+ Kg8 25.Rxe6!+–.

## 11.f5!

As we already discussed above, this works well thanks to the awkward development of ...Nbd7.

Greediness can prove to be a punishable sin after 11.b4? b6! 12.bxc5 bxc5,, when Black has very interesting compensation for the sacrificed piece. There is no need to engage in such a mess though.



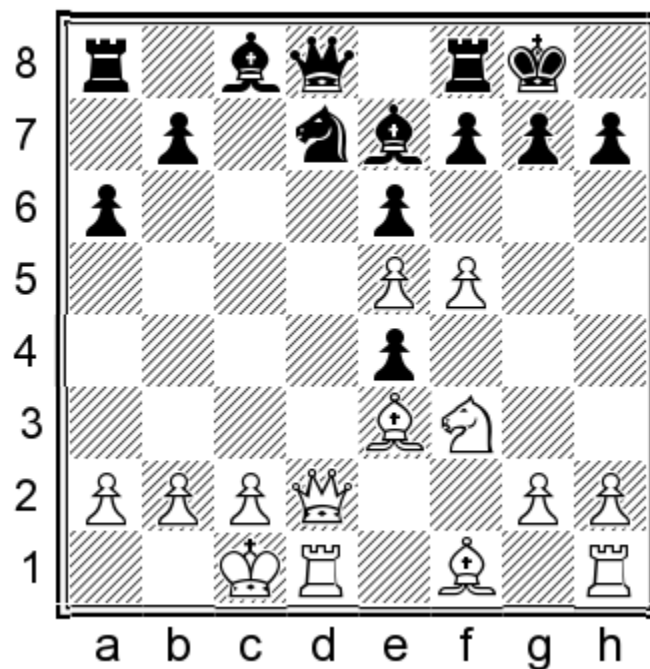
*Position after: 11.f5!*

## 11...Ne4

**A)** Black does not really have any other sensible move as 11...b5? fails due to 12.fxe6 fxe6 13.Nxd5! exd5 14.Qxd5++-, immediately giving White a decisive material advantage.

**B)** Whereas 11...Nb6? loses to the familiar move 12.f6!.

## 12.Nxe4 dxe4



*Position after: 12...dxe4*

As it usually goes with awkward sidelines, it should be enough to look at them once and then let them sleep somewhere in the back of your memory. All the same some analytical depth is necessary since it might be not so simple to crush Black's fortress without enough knowledge.

## 13.f6!

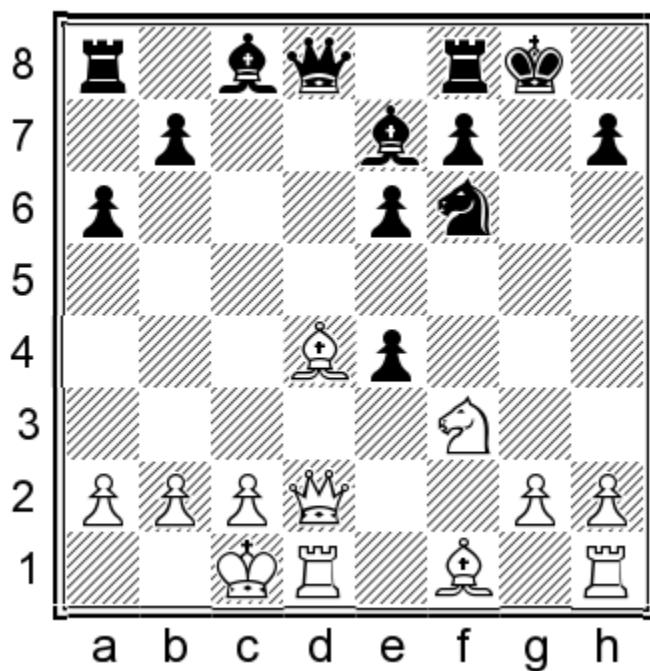
13.fxe6 fxe6 14.Ng5 looks quite tempting as well, since Black is forced to go for the following endgame, which is slightly better for White. 14...Nxe5 15.Qxd8 Rxd8 16.Rxd8+ Bxd8 17.Nxe4<sup>2</sup> It would be easy to conclude White has a small edge here, nevertheless I feel obliged to recommend something more tangible.

### 13...gxf6 14.exf6 Nxf6

There is no real choice.

14...Bxf6 fails to put enough pressure on White who has enough time to both develop their attack and prevent the queen exchange after 15.Ng5 Ne5 16.Qf2±.

### 15.Bd4!



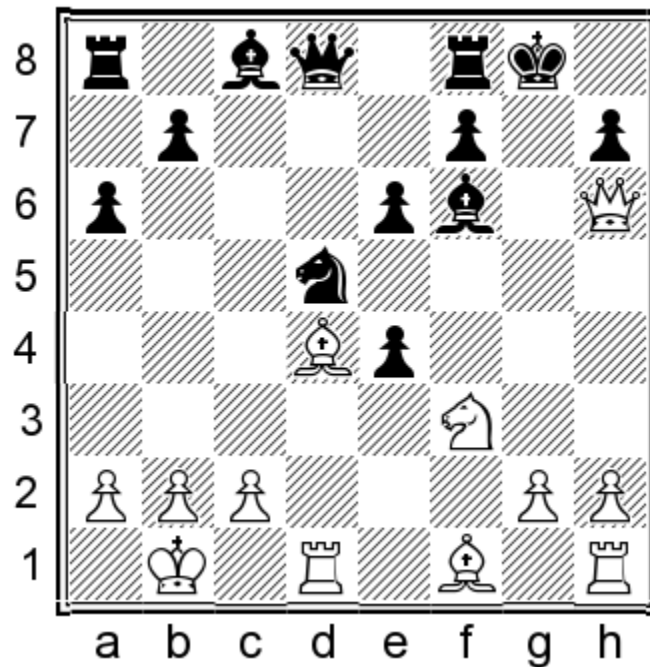
*Position after: 15.Bd4!*

A creative way to make sure the queens stay on the board and White's attack continues. Although Black has multiple options including accepting the Greek gift on f3, they always fall a bit short of equality.

### 15...Ng4

The most resilient defense.

**A)** 15...Nd5 16.Qh6 Bf6 17.Kb1!



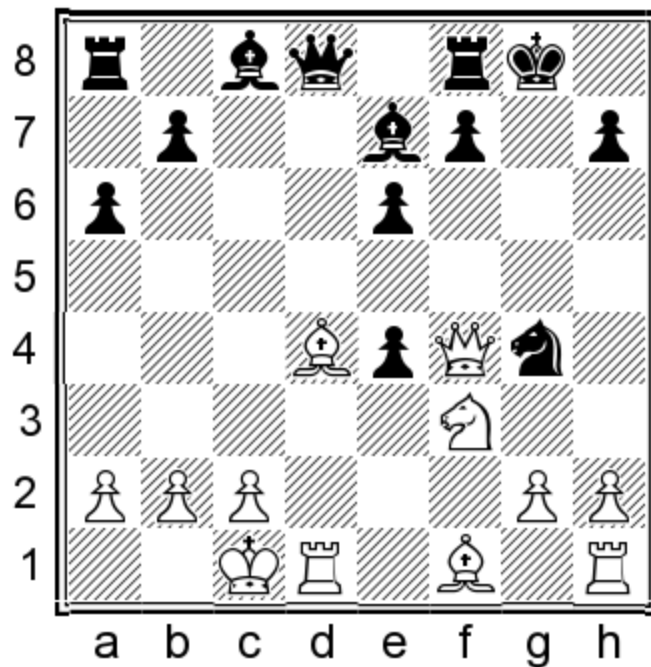
*Position after: 17.Kb1!*

puts Black in a really nasty situation. With their king safely hidden on b1 White is already threatening the devastating move Nf3-g5, whilst capturing the knight on f3 is highly inadvisable for Black as it would open up the path for White's bishop. 17...e5 [17...Bxd4? 18.Ng5 Nc3+ 19.Ka1!+- is an only, yet completely winning, move.; 17...exf3? 18.Bd3+- is simply over for Black.] 18.Nxe5 Bg7 19.Qd2 Be6 20.Bc4± Black managed to survive the first wave of White's attack but the price they had to pay was too high. Their position is fundamentally broken and White can happily switch to positional play.

**B)** 15...exf3? loses material by force after 16.Qg5+ Kh8 17.Qh6! when Black cannot defend both the f6-knight and their queen. 17...Rg8 18.Bxf6+ Bxf6 19.Rxd8 Bxd8 20.Qh3!

± White is not 100 percent assured of victory just yet but the rest of the game should just be office work for them.

### 16.Qf4!

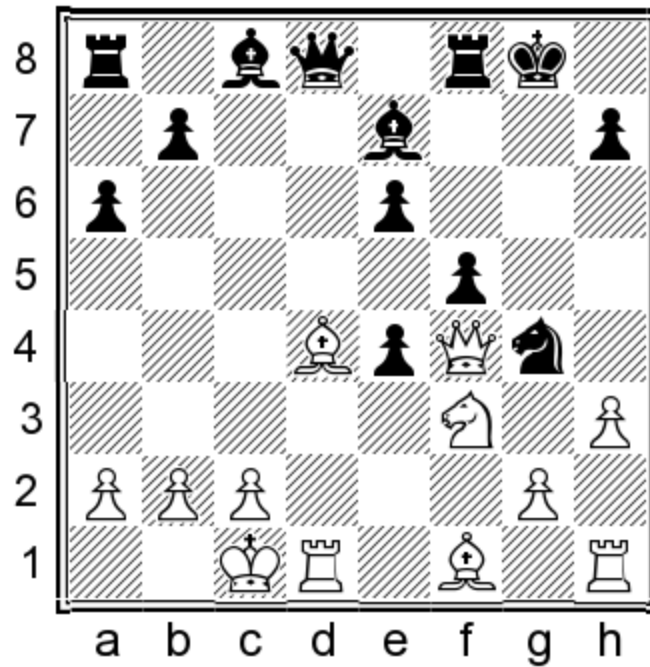


*Position after: 16.Qf4!*

### 16...f5

16...e5 ends up in a grim endgame for Black. 17.Bxe5 Qa5 18.Qxe4 Nxe5 19.Qxe5 Qxe5 20.Nxe5± It is true Black might claim their bishop pair compensates for a bit of White's material advantage, but it is clearly far away from being sufficient.

### 17.h3!



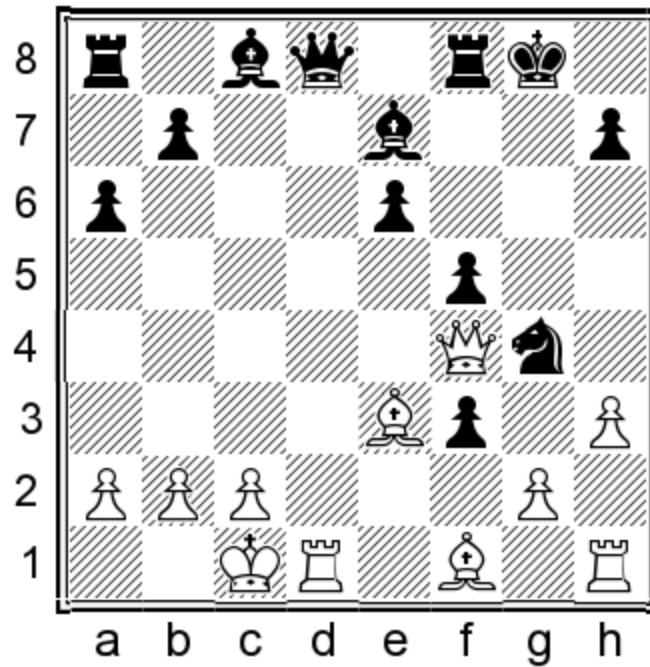
*Position after: 17.h3!*

Black's position seems a bit overextended and with some precision White should be able to extract a sizeable plus.

### **17...exf3**

The game is very forcing here so you should not worry about White being required to play only moves in some positions – that is simply part of the job, and if need be you should be able to find them on your own as well. Another forcing try for Black is 17...Bd6 18.Qd2 e3 when White can simply consolidate their advantage with 19.Bxe3 Nxe3 20.Qxe3 Qc7 21.Kb1<sup>2</sup>. White's king is significantly safer, their pieces are much better coordinated, and Black's position is full of weaknesses.

### **18.Be3™**



*Position after: 18.Be3™*

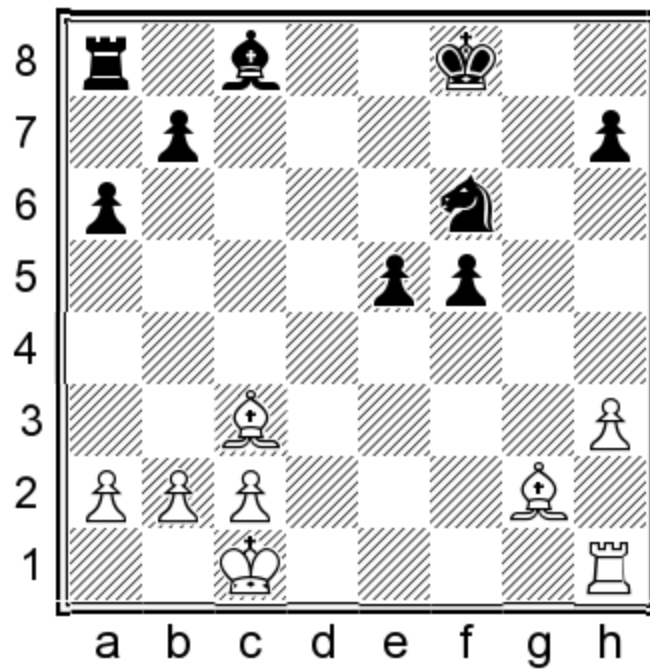
White has to first stop ...Bg5, which would pin their queen.

### **18...fxg2**

18...Bg5 leads to a pleasant endgame for White too.

19.Rxd8 Bxf4 20.Rxf8+ Kxf8 21.Bxf4 e5 22.Bd2 fxg2  
23.Bxg2 Nf6 24.Bc3

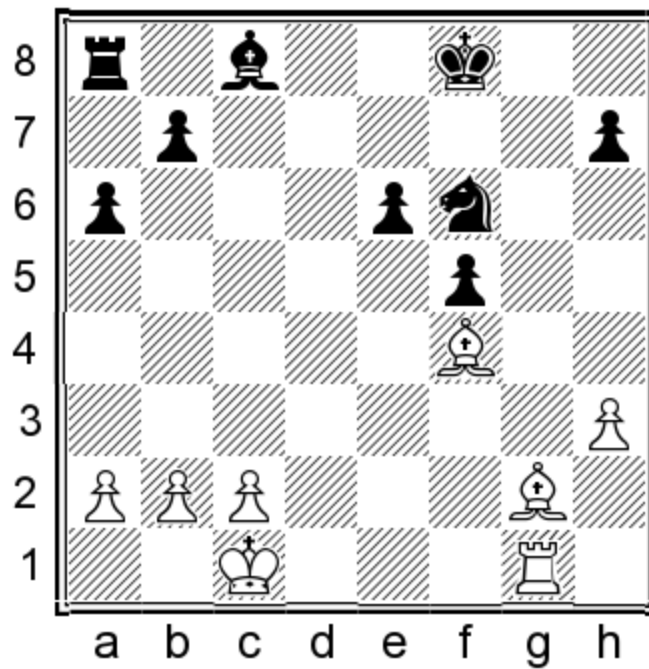




*Position after: 24.Bc3*

24...Ne4 [Holding on the pawn with 24...Nd7 is extremely dangerous due to 25.Rf1 f4 26.Rg1± intending Bd5 and Rg8+.] 25.Bxe5<sup>2</sup> Material is equal but White's bishop pair will terrorize Black for many moves to come.

**19.Bxg2 Bg5 20.Rxd8 Bxf4 21.Rxf8+ Kxf8 22.Bxf4 Nf6 23.Rg1<sup>2</sup>**

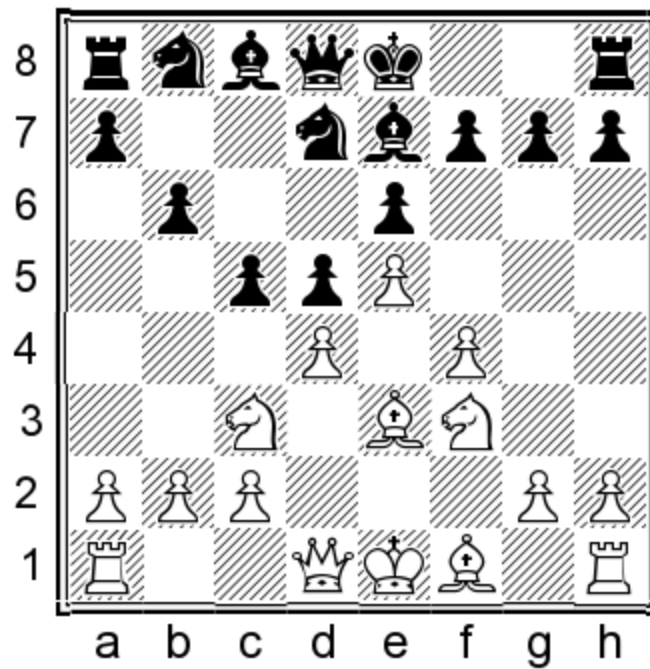


*Position after: 23.Rg1<sup>2</sup>*

White is in no danger here thanks to their tremendous activity. Black would more than happily exchange some of their passive pieces even at the cost of an extra pawn or two, but it is hard to even suggest a reasonable move for them here, while it is extremely easy for White to just keep the grip with natural moves.

**b) 7...b6 & 9...a5**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Be7  
7.Be3 b6**

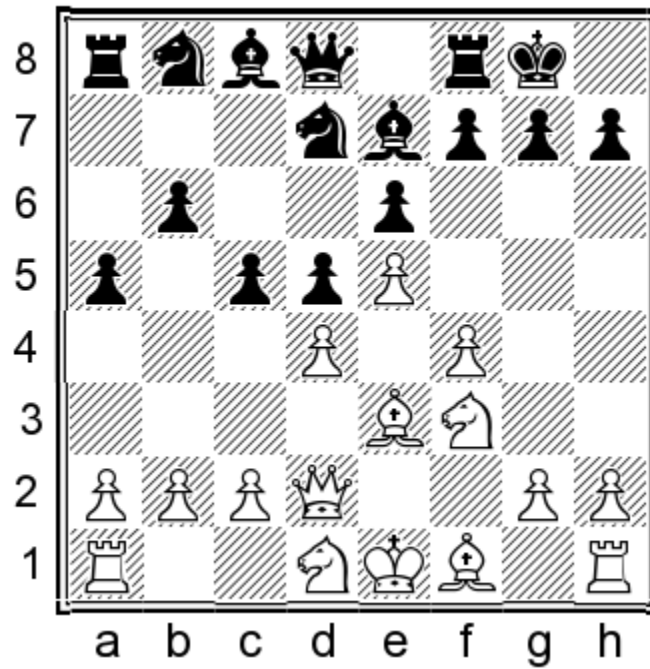


*Position after: 7...b6*

## **8.Qd2 0-0**

In an ideal world Black would like to exchange their traditionally passive Bc8 via the a6-square. The only downside is that such an approach is slow, and in the meantime White usually manages to develop a strong attack on the other side of the board.

## **9.Nd1 a5**

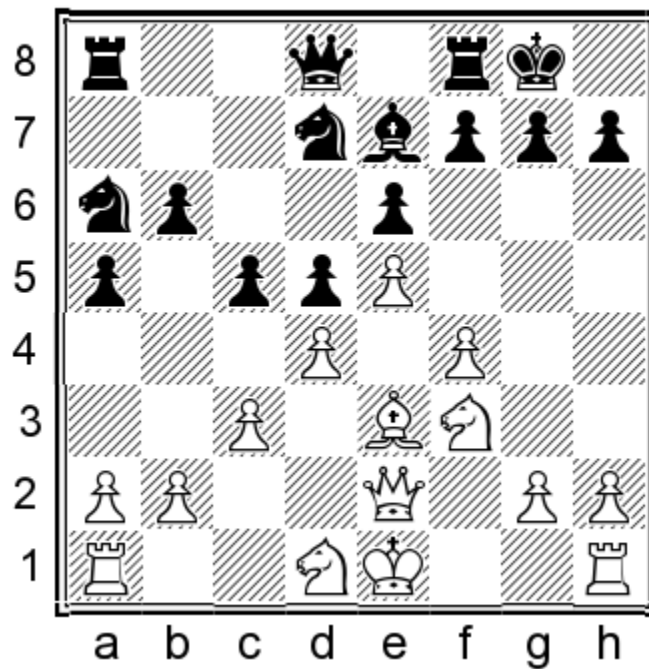


*Position after: 9...a5*

This has to be considered seriously as it has been used many times, amongst others by yours truly.

**10.c3 a4**

After 10...Ba6 11.Bxa6 Nxa6 12.Qe2!



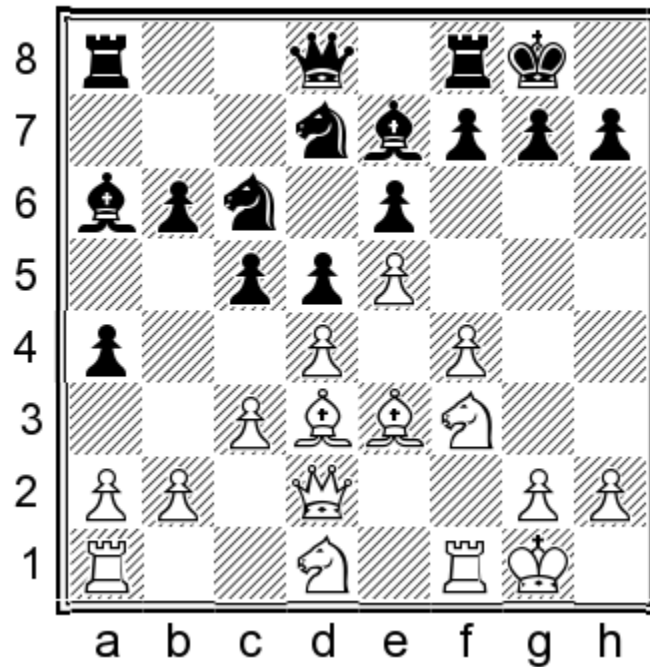
*Position after: 12.Qe2!*

it is not so easy to get counterplay on the queenside for Black, for example 12...c4 13.h4 b5 14.Bd2! (getting the e3-square for the d1-knight, and thus preparing f4-f5) 14...b4 [14...Nc7 15.Ne3 f6 16.h5, is no better and White has a strong grip on the kingside.] 15.f5! Qb6 16.Ng5± and White's attack will be much faster. Therefore, it makes sense to postpone the ...Ba6 move until White loses a tempo with their bishop, and in doing so gain some extra time.

### **11.Bd3 Ba6 12.0-0**

One fine point behind ...a4 is that 12.Bxa6 Nxa6 13.Qe2 b5! 14.Qxb5? is now impossible due to 14...c4! where White's queen is trapped – the a4-square is unavailable in comparison with the 10...Ba6 line because 15.Qxa4 Nb4!-+ wins material.

## 12...Nc6



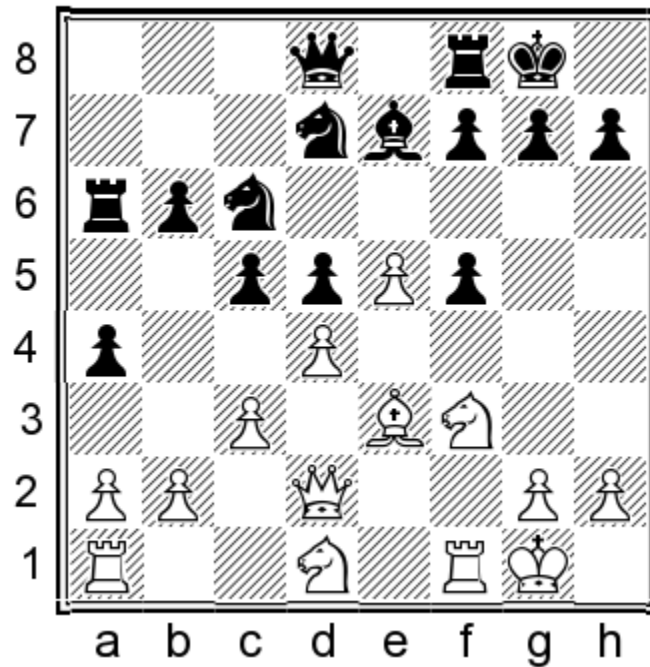
*Position after: 12...Nc6*

## 13.f5!

It is important to launch the kingside pawn storm as soon as possible. In Giri – Harikrishna, Stavanger 2016 my opponent played 13.Bxa6?! Rxa6 14.f5 but after 14...b5 $\infty$  he could not get further. The rook is actually not so badly placed on a6 as it can potentially join the fight via the 6th rank, should Black get a chance to capture the f5-pawn in a convenient fashion.

## 13...a3

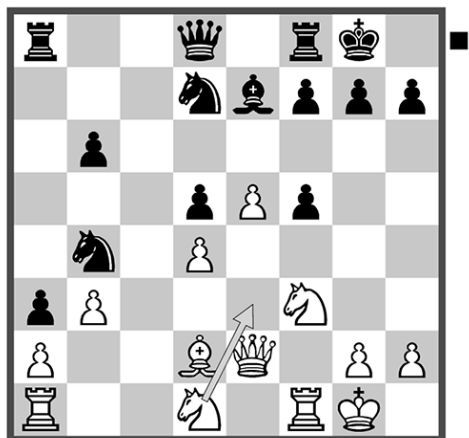
Temporarily sacrificing the f-pawn is quite a regular motive in Nd1 positions. Here after 13...exf5 14.Bxa6 Rxa6



*Position after: 14...Rxa6*

15.Bf4, intending Ne3, gives White very easy play. [For the less brave, 15.Qd3 b5 16.Qxf5<sup>2</sup> can be recommended as well.] Passive defense of the d5 and f5-pawns is not to be recommended for Black. White will get a great initiative on the kingside with 15...Ndb8 16.Ne3 Qd7 17.Qd3 g6 18.Bh6 Re8 19.Ng5©, already threatening to open up the position with g2-g4.

**14.b3 cxd4 15.cxd4 Bxd3 16.Qxd3 Nb4 17.Qe2 exf5 18.Bd2<sup>2</sup>**

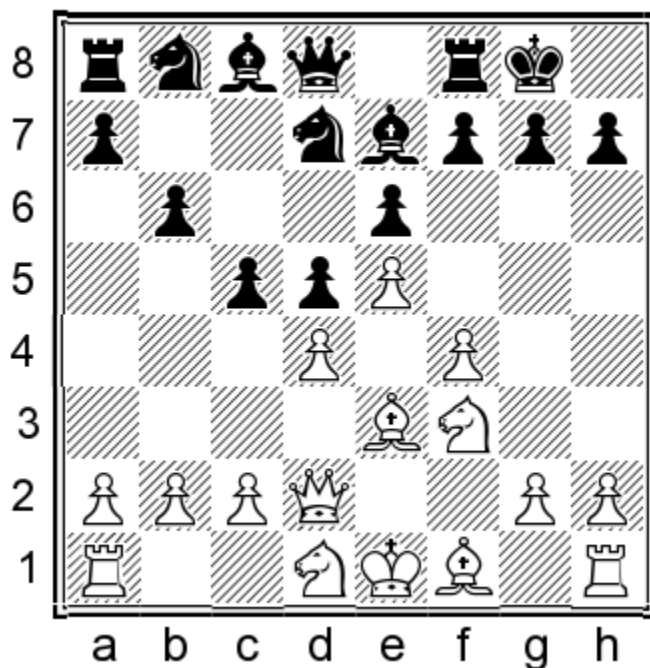


*Position after: 18.Bd2<sup>2</sup>*

Black has achieved a slightly improved version of the note on their 13th move, though our plan remains the same.

**c) 7...b6 & 9...cxd4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Be7 7.Be3 b6 8.Qd2 0-0 9.Nd1**





*Position after: 9.Nd1*

### **9...cxd4**

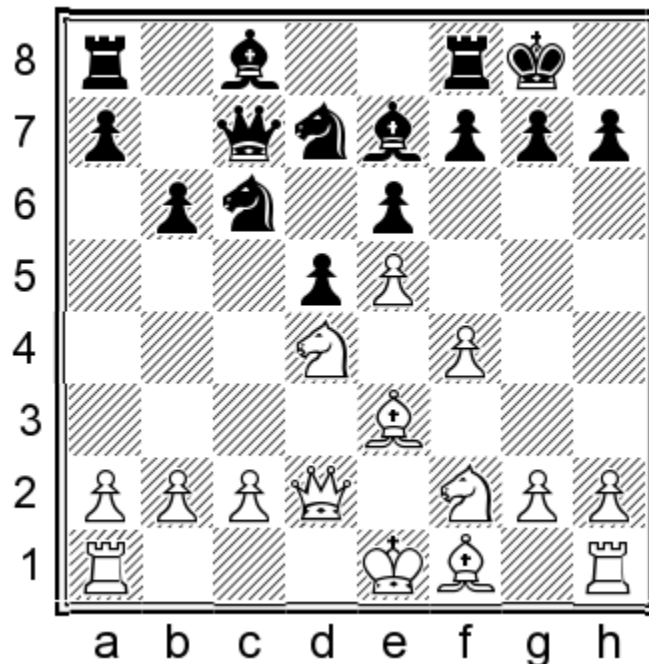
Mostly Nd1 should be a signal for Black to capture on d4, otherwise White will reinforce the center with c2-c3, thus preventing the breaking of their pawn chain.

9...Ba6 is a much less favorable version of the bishop exchange since after 10.Bxa6 Nxa6 11.c3 White is not obligated to recapture on d4 with the knight anymore.

### **10.Nxd4 Ba6**

**A)** 10...Bb7 will inevitably transpose after the eventual ...Nc5 and ...Nc6, e.g. 11.Be2 Nc5 12.Nf2 Nc6 13.0-0

**B)** Implementing a kind of a hybrid approach, switching back to ...Nc6 with 10...Qc7 11.Nf2 Nc6 is quite inconsistent and White is comfortably better.

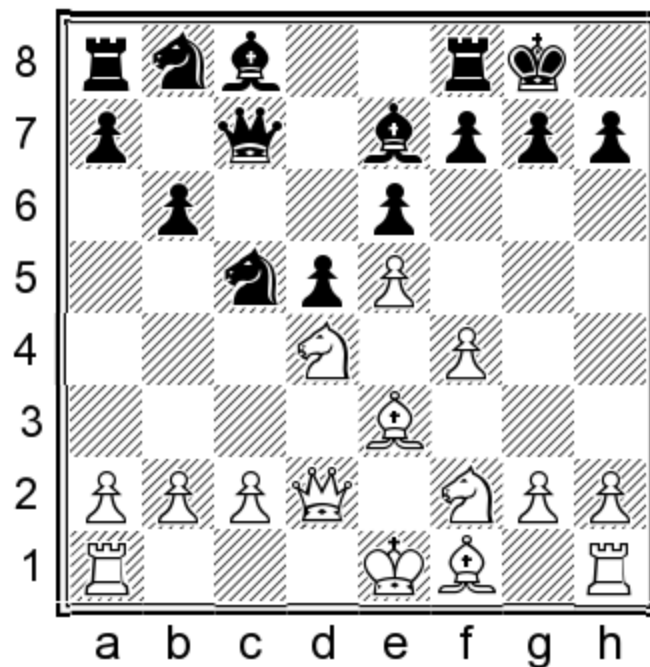


*Position after: 11...Nc6*

**B1)** 12.c3 Nc5 13.Be2 Ba6 14.0-0 Bxe2 15.Qxe2 Nxd4 16.Bxd4, where White has more space and a clear plan of playing on the kingside – be it playing for the f4-f5 push or bringing their heavy pieces to the g-file. Black's future plans are much less clear.

**B2)** I was trying to make the more active 12.0-0-0 work too but, surprisingly, after 12...Nxd4 13.Bxd4 Nb8!, intending ...Nc6, things are far from clear. In this scenario, long castling seems to be effective only after Black commits their knight to c5.

**C)** 10...Nc5 11.Nf2 Qc7 should be compared to the previous note.

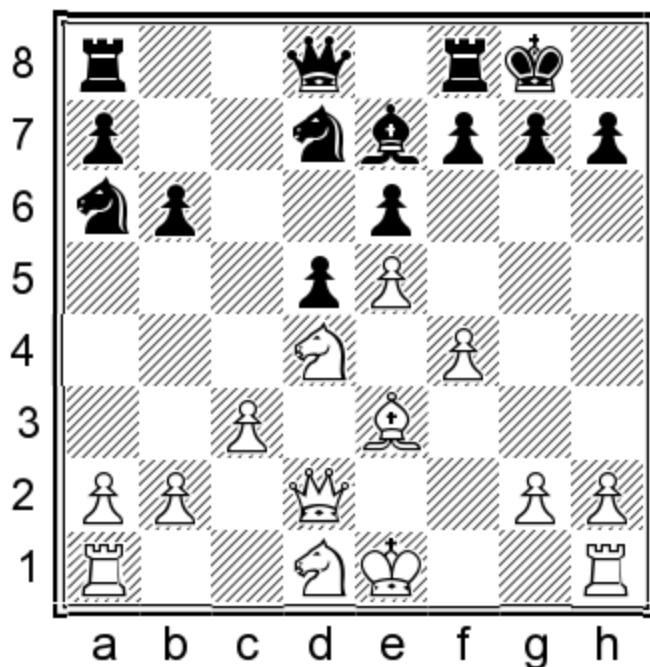


*Position after: 11...Qc7*

Here Be2 will most likely transpose but 12.0-0-0! is even stronger, giving White great attacking chances on the

kingside after 12...Bb7 13.h4 Nc6 14.h5 h6 15.Kb1<sup>2</sup>, simply intending to crush Black with g4-g5.

### **11.Bxa6 Nxa6 12.c3**



*Position after: 12.c3*

Even though White did not manage to reinforce their center in time to keep their structure intact, the Nc3-d1 maneuver will not go to waste as the knight will have nice prospects on f2.

### **12...Qc7 13.0-0 Nac5 14.Nf2**

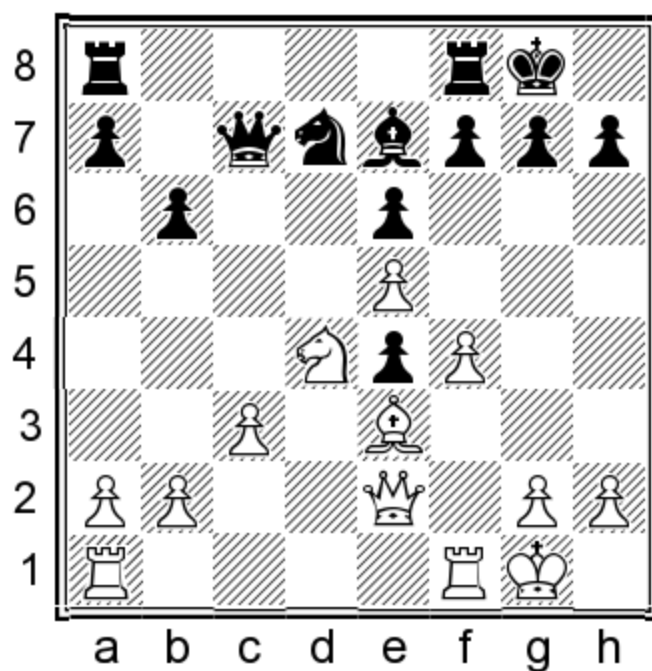
White's next moves will be Qe2 and Rae1, and at the right moment they can decide to fully switch their attention to Black's kingside with either Qe2-g4 or Nf2-g4. On the other side of the board it is a tough task for the defender to find a

reliable source of counterplay and their “doubled” c5-knight is quite awkward.

Rough solutions like

**14...Ne4 15.Nxe4 dxe4**

are no good for them either, after the simple 16.Qe2<sup>2</sup>



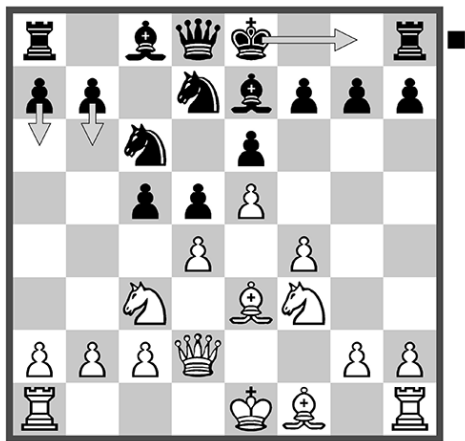
*Position after: 16.Qe2<sup>2</sup>*

White enjoys a pleasant advantage.

# Chapter 11

## ...Nc6 & ...Be7

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 11 - ...Nc6 & ...Be7

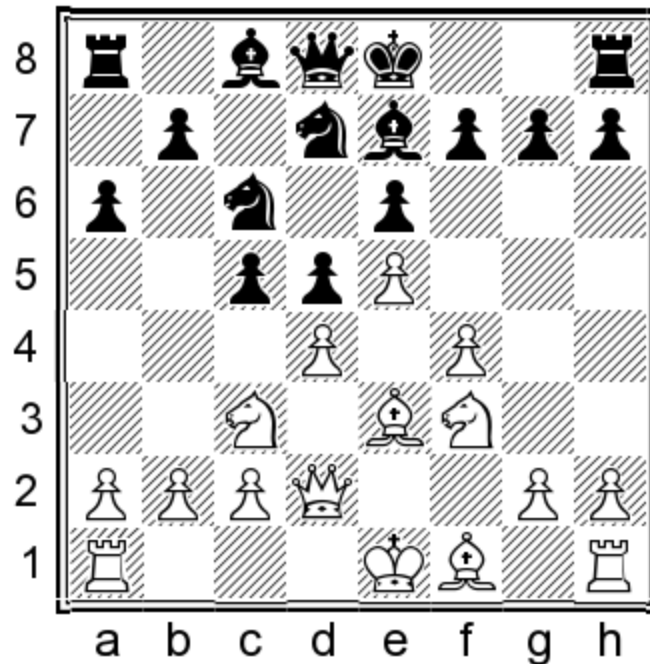
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2

- a) 8...a6!? & 11...--
- b) 8...a6!? & 11...Qb6
- c) 8...0-0
- d) 8...b6!?

**a) 8...a6!? & 11...--**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2**

White's play is not very different from the lines discussed in the earlier ...Be7 chapter. Depending on Black's set-up, White should be ready to castle on either side, although it goes without saying that we'd prefer the more aggressive queenside castling. I'd like to bring your attention first to the cunning move order 8...a6!?



*Position after: 8...a6!?*

which postpones castling in favor of a quicker initiative on the other side. Our response is 9.Be2!

**A)** The problem is that 9.dxc5 Nxc5 10.0-0-0 Qa5 11.Kb1 b5 gives Black quite good counterplay – their king actually feels quite comfortable on e8 for the time being. In many lines investigated below it often turns out that Black’s short castling only gives White clear play on the kingside.

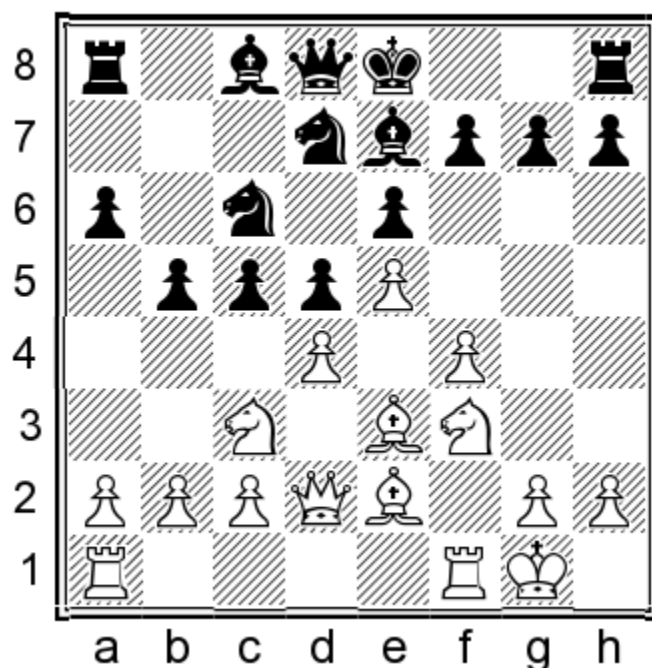
**B)** It would be nice to start with 9.Bd3 but after 9...b5 10.0-0 b4 Black is getting too many tempi hitting White’s pieces with ...b4 and ...c4.

## 9...b5

If White implements the identical plan without including Qd2, ...a6, Black’s solution to their opening problems is 9...0-0 10.0-0 f6. Including Qd2 and the now obviously

useless ...a6 favor White though as after 11.exf6 Nxf6 12.dxc5<sup>2</sup> Black might manage to capture the c5-pawn after some difficulties but the dark-squared issues will be there to stay.

## 10.0-0



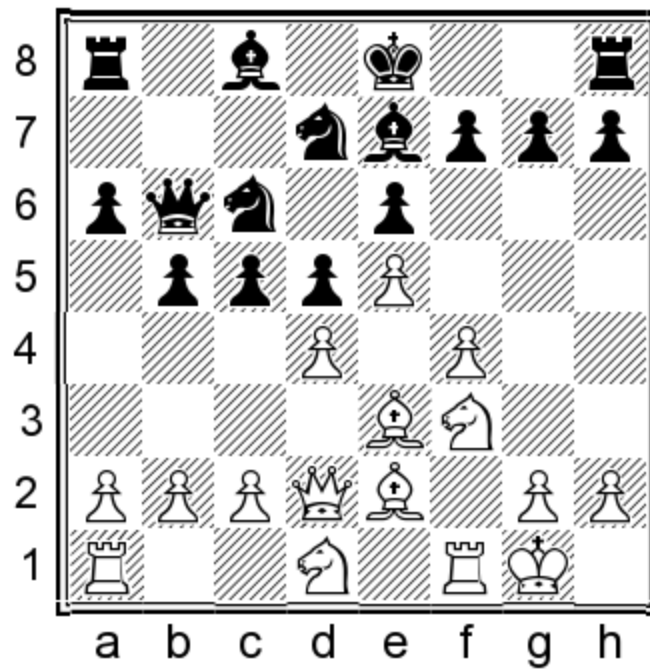
*Position after: 10.0-0*

We will see similar structures in the 7...a6 chapter as well. Here Black has already committed to ...Be7, which limits their options severely.

## 10...0-0

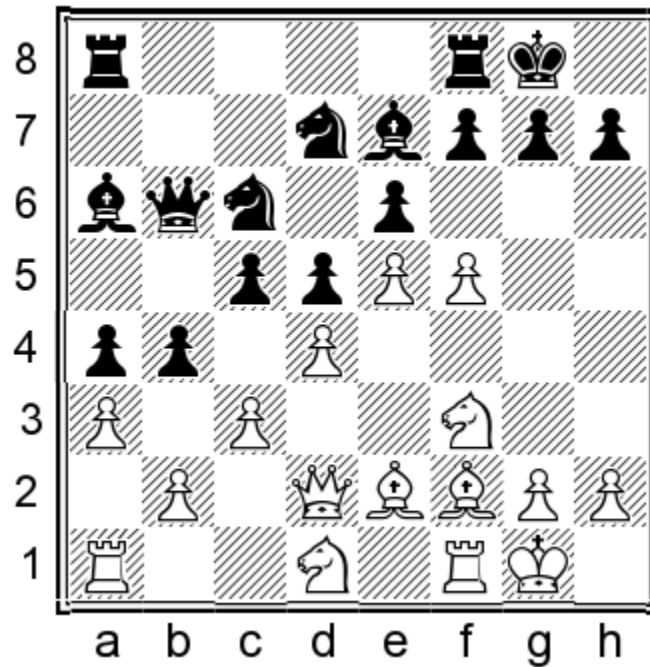
**A)** 10...Qb6!? calls for 11.Nd1! [11.a3?! would allow Black to reach a nice set-up after 11...cxd4 12.Nxd4 Bc5 and ultimately a roughly balanced endgame 13.Rad1 Nxd4 14.Bxd4 Bxd4+ 15.Qxd4 Qxd4+ 16.Rxd4 Ke7]





*Position after: 11.Nd1!*

**A1)** 11...a5 12.a3! Ba6, stubbornly avoiding transpositions, backfires terribly after 13.f5! 0-0 14.c3 Black should keep their bishop on c8 as long as possible so that the f4-f5 push is not so effective. Here Black cannot really afford to accept the pawn sacrifice in view of the standard Bf4 & Nd1-e3 maneuver, but even after the counterattacking 14...a4 15.Bf2 b4 things seem to be too easy for White.

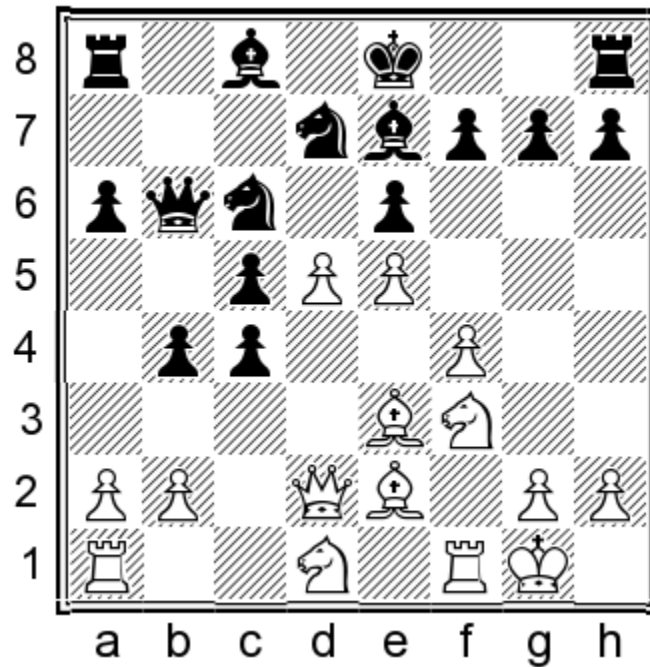


*Position after: 15...b4*

The threat of f5-f6 is always hanging in the air and after they secure their queenside with, say, 16.dxc5 bxc3 17.Nxc3 Bxc5 18.Bxa6 Rxa6 19.Rae1, they will finally be ready to start the kingside attack. 19...Ne7 20.f6,

**A2)** After 11...cxd4 12.Nxd4 Nxd4 13.Bxd4 Bc5 14.c3± White is in full control – this is the move the first player needs to have at their disposal.

**A3)** Finally 11...b4 will also fail to outsmart us after 12.c4! dxc4 13.d5!,,

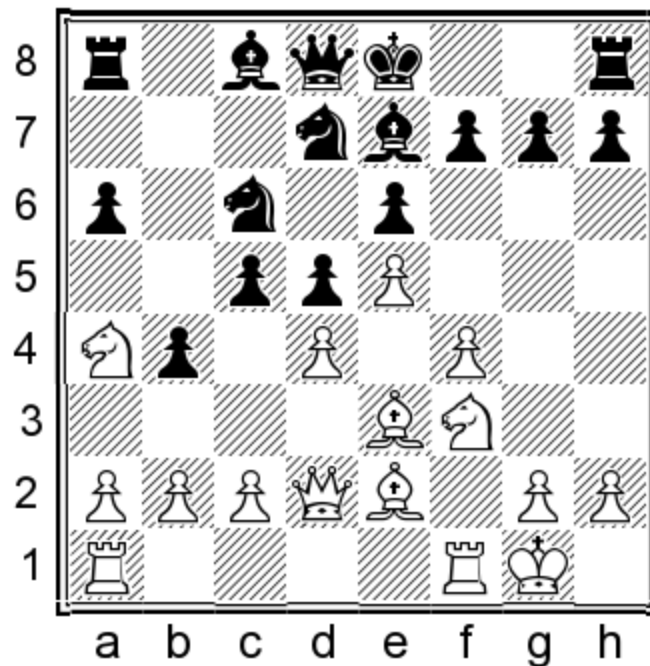


*Position after: 13.d5!,*

If you studied the previous chapters carefully, you should not be surprised to see this recurring theme in action once again.

**A4)** 11...0-0 12.a3 transposes below.

**B)** Similarly, do not forget that our preferred reaction to 10...b4 is 11.Na4!



*Position after: 11.Na4!*

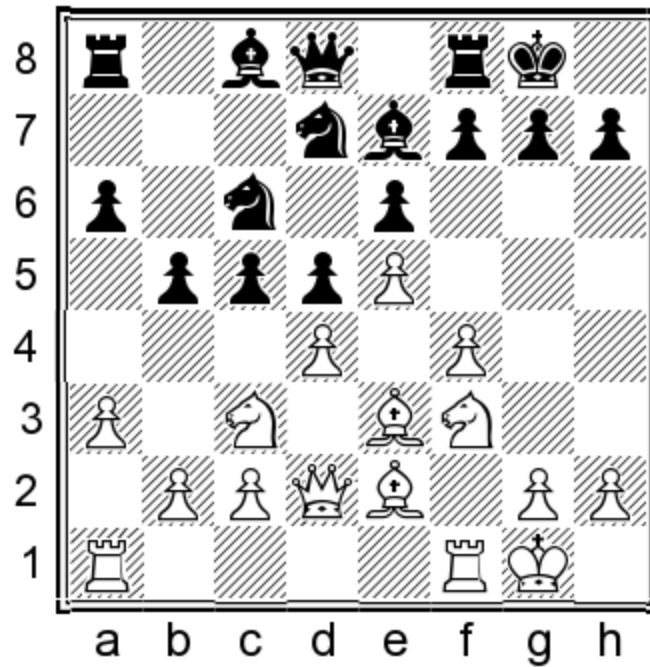
when after 11...cxd4 12.Nxd4 Nxd4 13.Bxd4<sup>2</sup> White has brilliant control over the critical b6 and c5-squares.

### **11.a3!**

Heavy theoretical discussion featuring names like Giri, Dominguez, or Vallejo Pons has been occurring here lately so it is a very topical sideline that we are looking at.

Nevertheless, White is scoring above average here and, after investigating a couple of possible defensive set-ups, we should be able to conclude that they are simply better.

11.Nd1?! b4! is not exactly bad for White bad but it throws them out of the suggested repertoire.

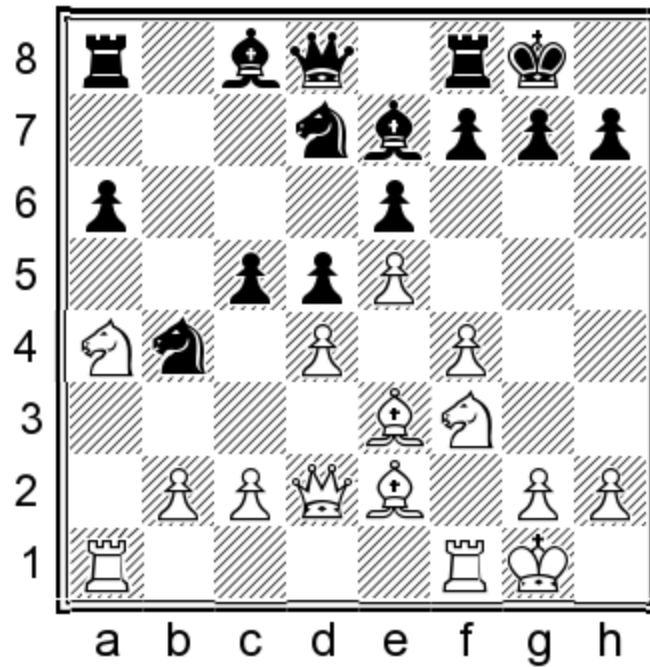


*Position after: 11.a3!*

### **11...Qc7!?**

I discovered this move, which is surprisingly difficult to crack, having seen numerous correspondence players advocate this approach.

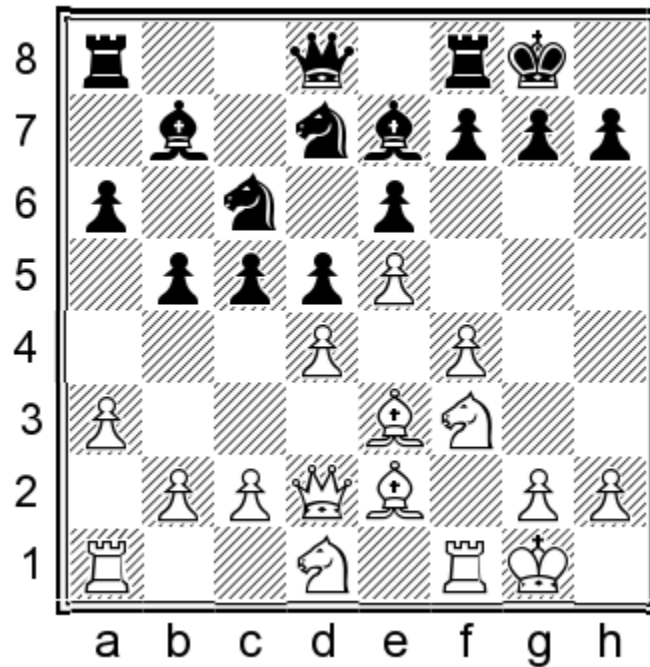
**A)** 11...b4 still does not bother White at all and capturing with a piece instead, 12.axb4 Nxb4, gets the exact same treatment we already saw for ...b4. 13.Na4!



*Position after: 13.Na4!*

This forces Black to relinquish all their pressure in the center. 13...c4 14.g4!± Completely logical - as Black is absolutely toothless in the middle of the board, it is time to storm the flank.

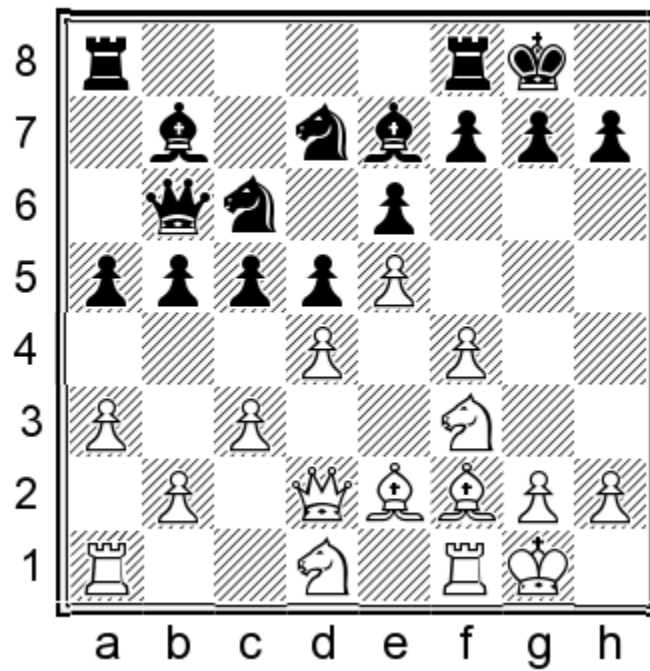
**B)** 11...Bb7 is thematically related to 11...Qb6. Our general set-up now, after we took ... b4 under control, is still the same Nd1 & c2-c3 maneuver. 12.Nd1



*Position after: 12.Nd1*

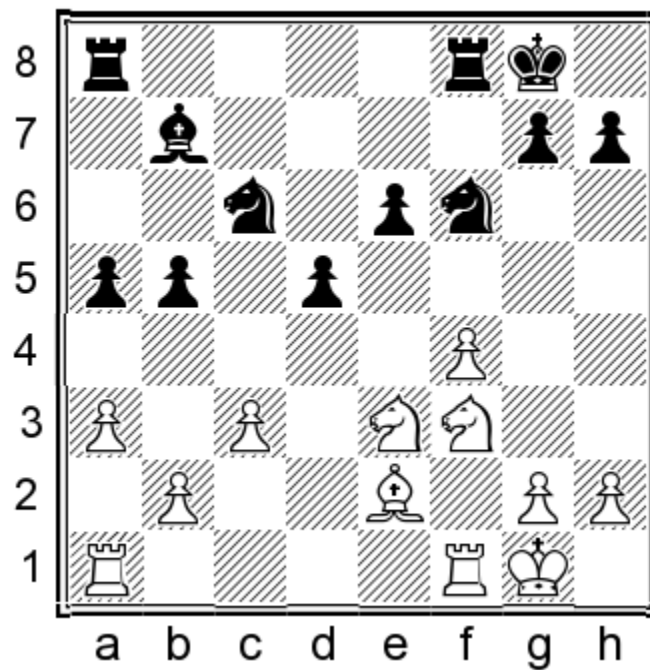
**B1)** 12...cxd4 13.Nxd4 does not go well with ...Bb7 and it can be compared to 11...Qc7. Here 13...Nxd4 14.Bxd4 Nb8 15.Ne3 Nc6 16.c3 Nxd4 17.cxd4<sup>2</sup> is a significantly worse version – the b7-bishop is terribly placed and there is nothing stopping White from pushing f4-f5 soon.

**B2)** 12...Qb6 13.c3 a5 [13...Na5 fails to cause White much headache and any queen move except for 14.Qc1 should be good enough, e.g. 14.Qe1 Nb3 15.Rb1<sup>2</sup>] 14.Bf2



*Position after: 14.Bf2*

**B2.1)** 14...f6 15.exf6 Nxf6 16.dxc5! Bxc5 17.Bxc5 Qxc5+ 18.Qe3 Qxe3+ 19.Nxe3

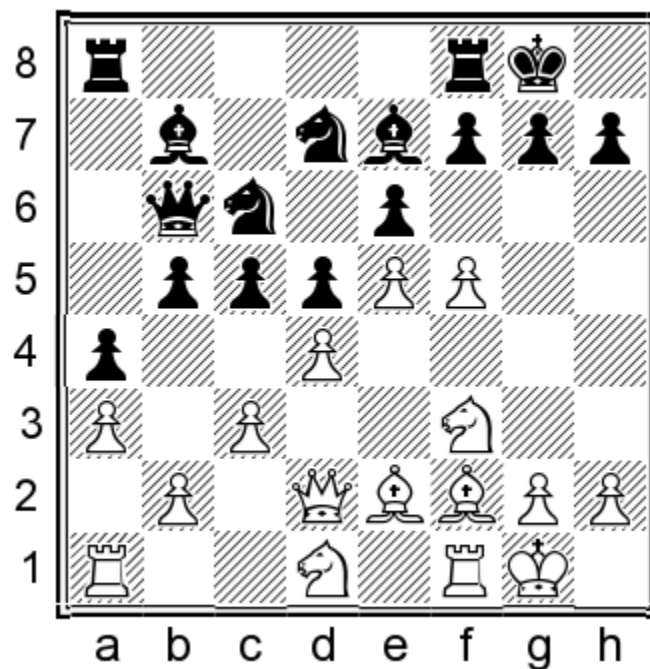




*Position after: 19.Nxe3*

ended up being a nice strategy lecture on the topic of blockade in Svidler – Hou, Amsterdam 2009. The game continued 19...b4 20.axb4 axb4 21.cxb4 Nxb4 22.Nd4<sup>2</sup> and White went on to win an instructive endgame.

**B2.2)** 14...a4 As a matter of fact Hou's 14...f6 makes a lot of sense considering White will push 15.f5!



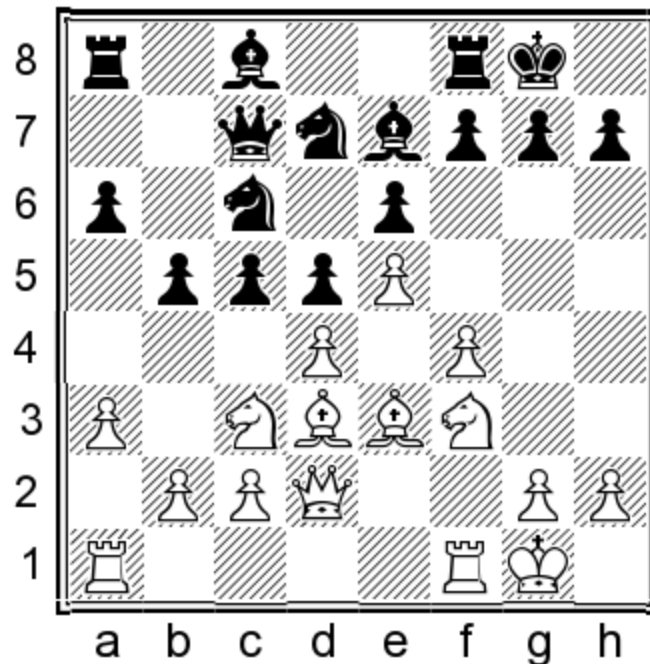
*Position after: 15.f5!*

after almost anything else. For example, 15...cxd4 16.cxd4 Na5 17.f6 gxf6 18.Qh6 f5 19.Ne3 Kh8 20.g4! Rg8 21.Kh1!, gives White a completely devastating attack.

## **12.Bd3!**

Since Black is saying pass, we make a useful move as well, bringing the bishop to a more active outpost.

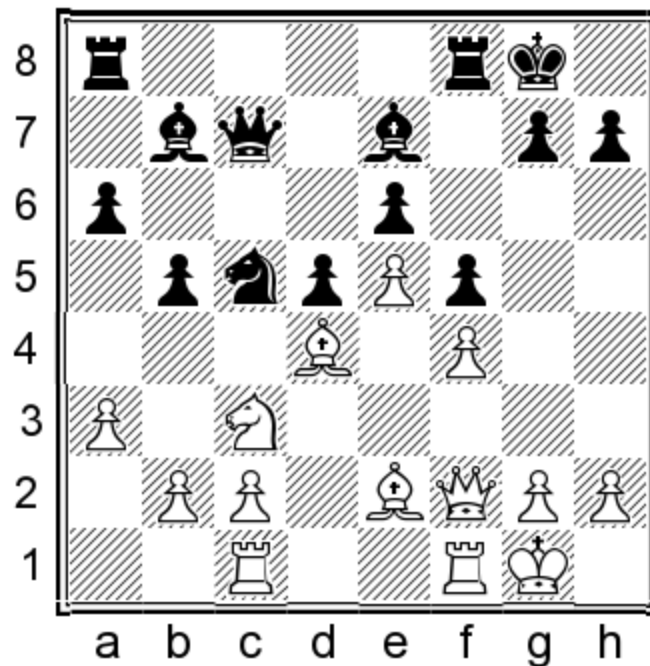
Black is playing a waiting game, wishing for 12.Nd1 cxd4 13.Nxd4 Nxd4 14.Bxd4 Nb8 15.c3 Nc6 16.Ne3 Nxd4 17.cxd4 where their position remains very solid. It would be a completely different story with the bishop on b7 as in the 11...Bb7 line but here after 17...Bd7 White has not been able to get past the ultra solid defensive line in practice.



*Position after: 12.Bd3!*

## 12...Rb8

**A)** Closing the center leaves Black slightly worse after 12...f5 13.Qf2!, forcing a clarification regarding the remaining central tension. 13...Nxd4 14.Nxd4 cxd4 15.Bxd4 Nc5 16.Be2 Bb7 17.Rac1! White is getting ready for the future ...Ne4, which is basically the only active option Black has in this position.

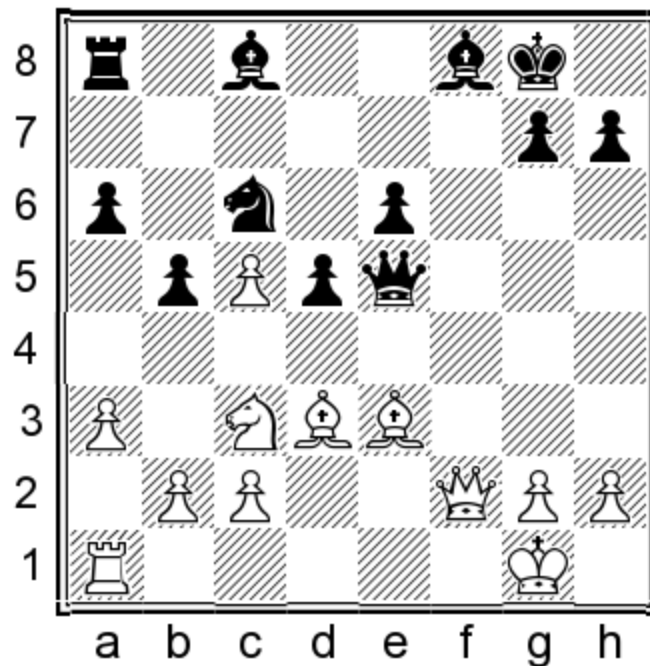


*Position after: 17.Rac1!*

On the other hand, if the second player just decides to stand still, White can easily prepare a kingside pawn storm with Kh1, Rg1, and g4. 17...Ne4 18.Nxe4 dxe4 19.c4! <sup>2</sup> is the point.

**B)** 12...c4 13.Be2± gives White a free hand on the kingside as usual and they can push with g4, h4-h5 as much as they like.

**C)** Although White lost a tempo by playing Bd3 in two moves, Black cannot really utilize this with a concrete move like 12...f6 as White is more than ready for the position opening up. 13.dxc5 fxe5 14.fxe5 Ndx5 15.Nxe5 Qxe5 16.Rxf8+ Bxf8 17.Qf2<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 17.Qf2*

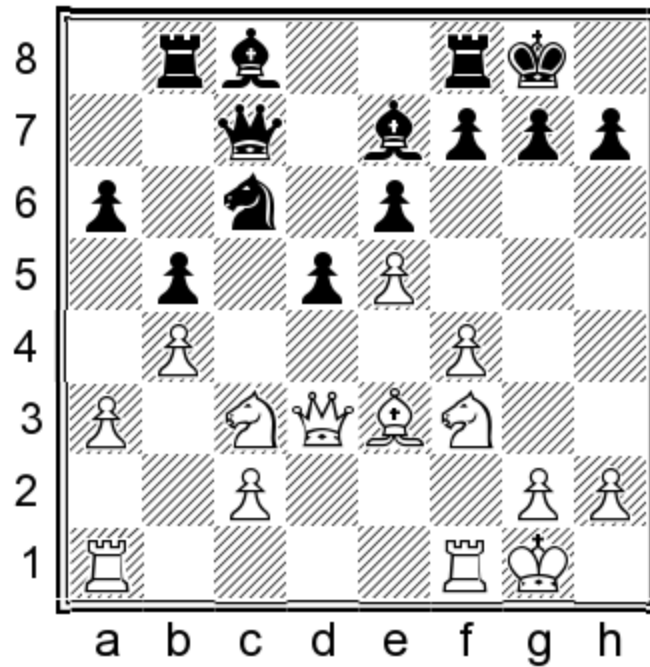
White has a strong grip on the dark squares and their army is clearly better developed – all it takes to bring the last piece into attack is the move Ra1-f1.

With their last move White prepared an interesting transformation as well – they want to occupy all the central dark squares and they do not hesitate to give up even the precious light-squared bishop!

**13.dxc5! Nxc5 14.b4**

It is quite important that the e4-square is under control, otherwise ...Ne4 would solve most of Black's problems. Now their troubles are only just beginning.

**14...Nxd3 15.Qxd3**



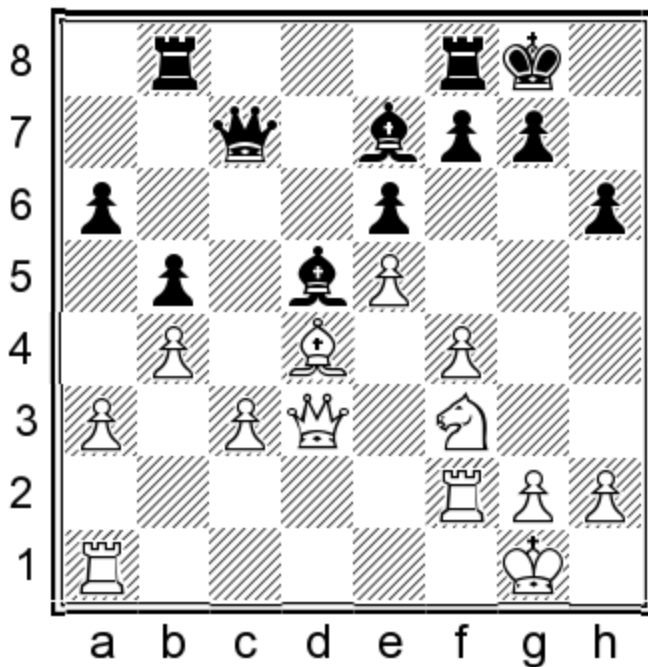
*Position after: 15.Qxd3*

### **15...a5**

The most direct try and at the same time the only real attempt to cross White's plans.

**A)** 15...Bb7 16.Ne2 d4!? is a nice attempt to stir things up a little but Black's prospects remain gloomy after

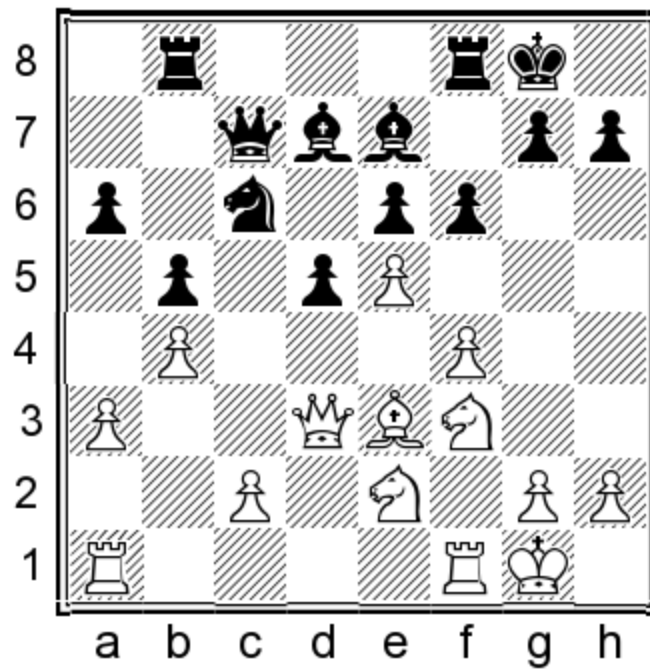
17.Nexd4 Nxd4 18.Bxd4 Bd5 19.Rf2 h6 20.c3<sup>2</sup>,



*Position after: 20.c3<sup>2</sup>*

simply holding on to the pawn. Black has some compensation on the light squares but at least from practical point of view White's play will be much easier as they still have the simple f4-f5 plan still in stock.

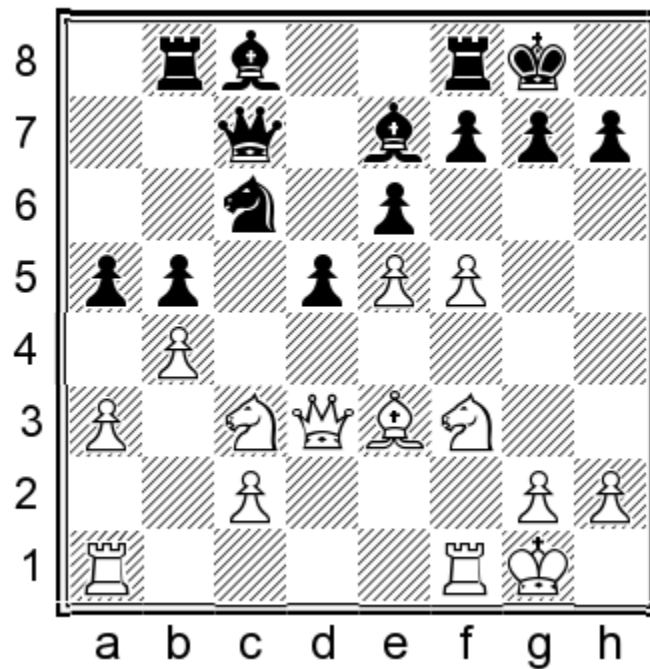
**B)** Chipping away at White's center from the other side with 15...Bd7 16.Ne2 f6 changes their dark-squared dominance very little.



*Position after: 16...f6*

17.exf6 Bxf6 18.Rae1 and now, besides the d4 and c5-squares, even the e5-square is severely weakened.

**16.f5!**



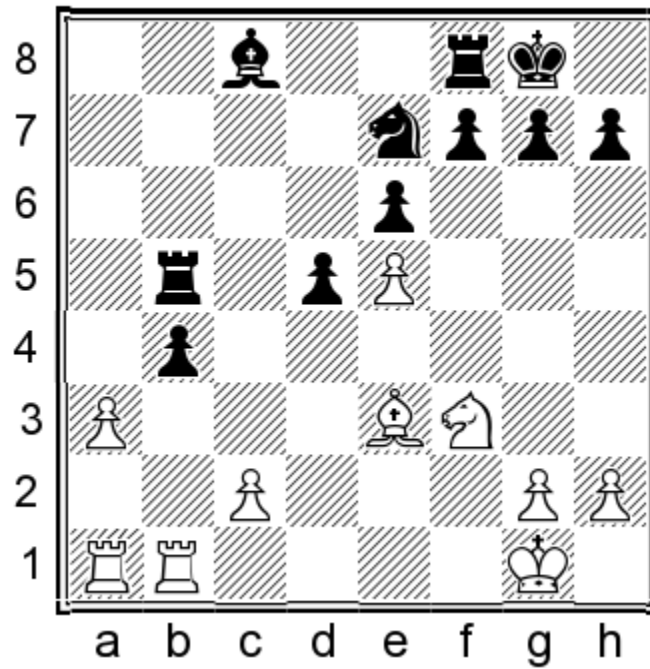
*Position after: 16.f5!*

Once again Black is not fully prepared for a direct encounter.

**16...d4!**

It would be a bit impractical to give a complex analysis in a sideline like this, and so I will focus on the most critical variation. Other lines, such as 16...axb4 17.Nxb5 Qb7 18.f6 Qxb5 19.fxe7 Nxe7 20.Qxb5 Rxb5 21.Rfb1±

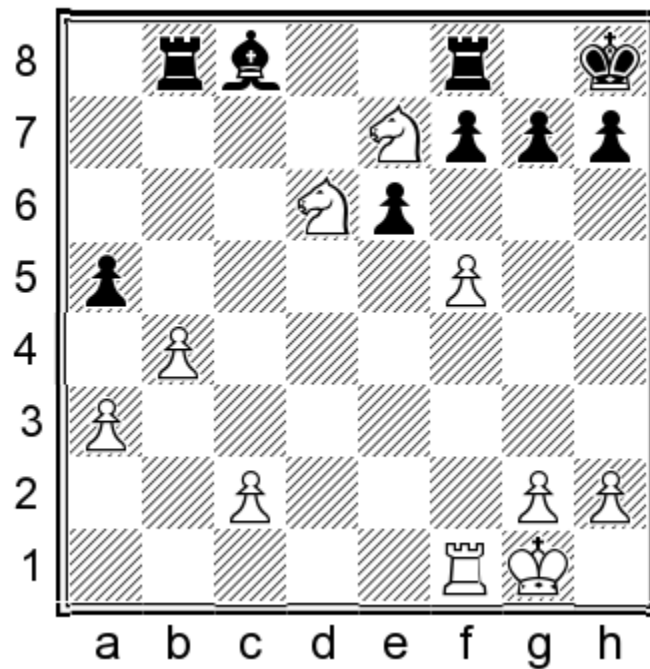




*Position after: 21.Rfb1±*

are clearly worse for Black, who suffers material losses or ends up checkmated in the end.

**17.Nxd4 Nxe5 18.Ncxb5 Qc4 19.Qxc4 Nxc4 20.Nc6 Nxe3 21.Nxe7+ Kh8 22.Nd6 Nxf1 23.Rxf1**

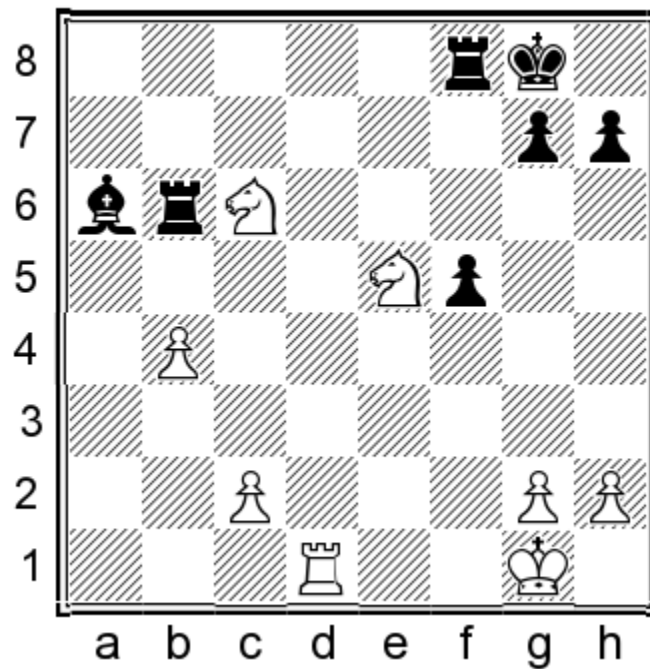


*Position after: 23.Rxf1*

**23...Ba6**

23...axb4 24.Nexc8 will eventually boil down to a 3 vs 2 rook endgame after 24...bxa3 25.fxe6 g5 26.Nxf7+ Kg7 27.e7 Rfxc8 28.Nd6<sup>2</sup> which can definitely be played for a win by White.

**24.Rd1 axb4 25.axb4 exf5 26.Nc6 Rb6 27.Nxf7+ Kg8 28.Nfe5<sup>2</sup>**

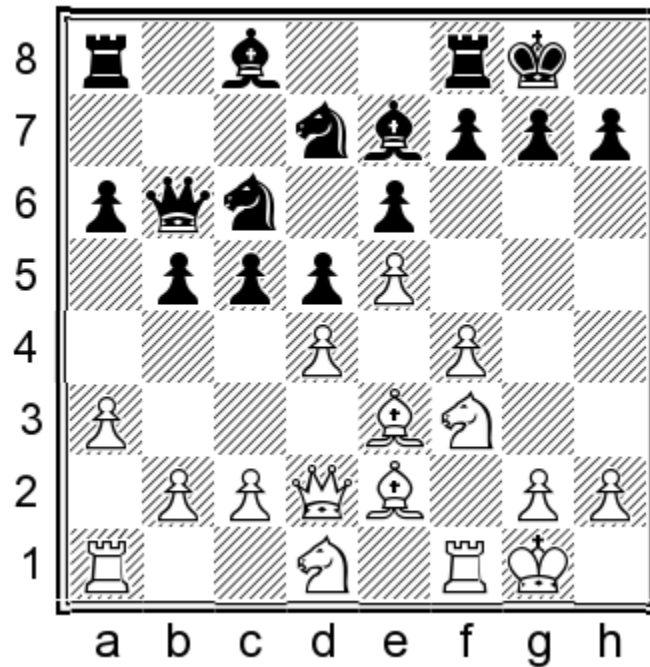


*Position after: 28.Nfe5<sup>2</sup>*

We delved a bit deeper this time, but even with the most precise defense Black always remains on the wrong side of the draw. Fighting the two passers will be a difficult task.

**b) 8...a6!? & 11...Qb6**

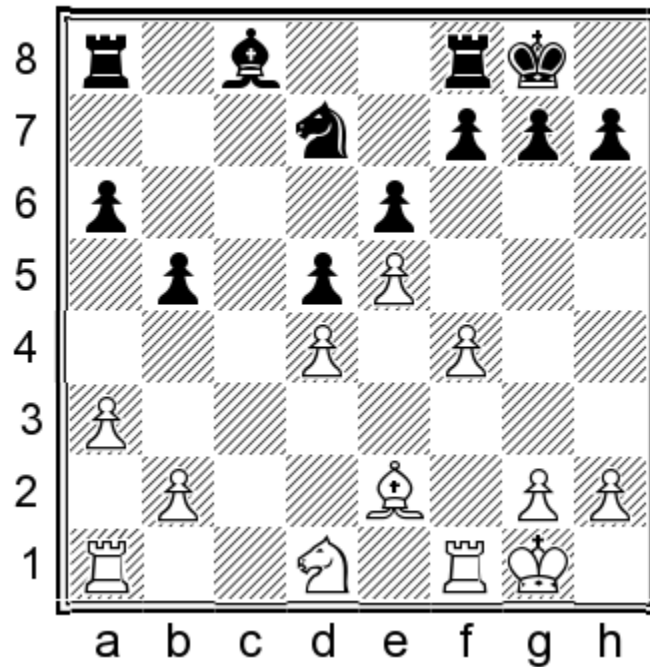
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2 a6!? 9.Be2! b5 10.0-0 0-0 11.a3! Qb6  
12.Nd1**



*Position after: 12.Nd1*

## 12...a5

**A)** 12...cxd4 is not so effective here due to White's ability to reinforce d4 with c2-c3 easily. 13.Nxd4 Nxd4 14.Bxd4 The only way to legitimize ...Qb6 is simplifying with 14...Qxd4+ 15.Qxd4 Bc5, and that condemns Black to defending a rather unfortunate ending after 16.c3 Bxd4+ 17.cxd4.

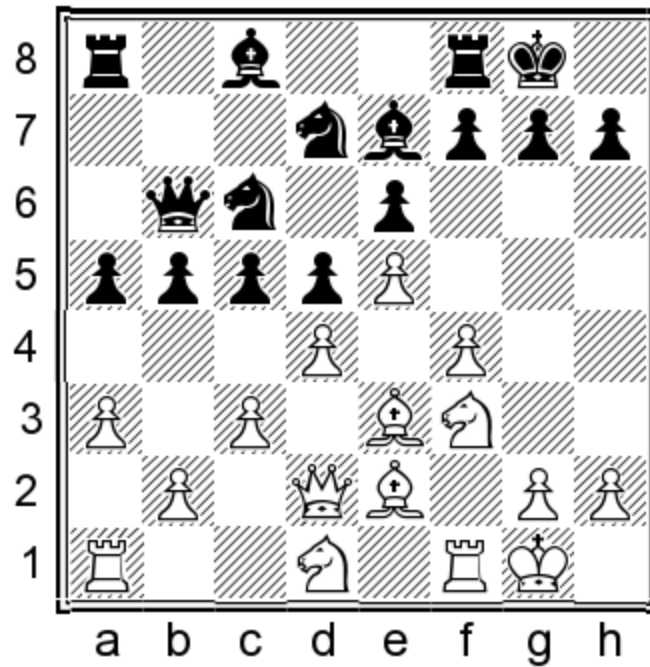


*Position after: 17.cxd4*

Play might continue 17...Nb8 18.Rc1 Bd7 19.Ne3 Nc6 20.Rfd1<sup>2</sup> with nice prospects for White mainly thanks to the difference in the bishops' activity.

**B)** 12...Bb7 is analyzed via the 11...Bb7 move order.

**13.c3**

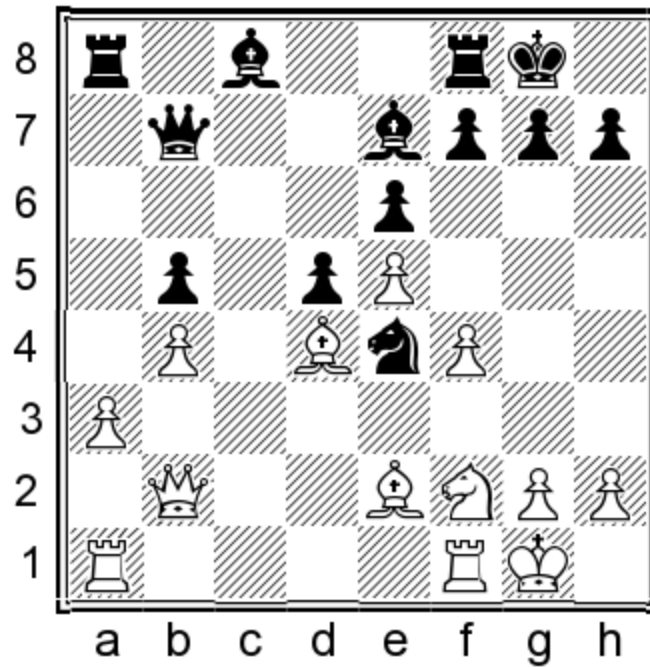


*Position after: 13.c3*

Black is pushing their queenside like a madman but, after all, they should not forget the goal of a chess game is to checkmate the opponent's king!

### **13...a4**

Releasing the tension prematurely gives White the familiar dark-squared bind: 13...cxd4 14.Nxd4 Nc5 15.b4 axb4 16.cxb4 Ne4 17.Qb2 Nxd4 18.Bxd4 Qb7 19.Nf2 with easy play for White.



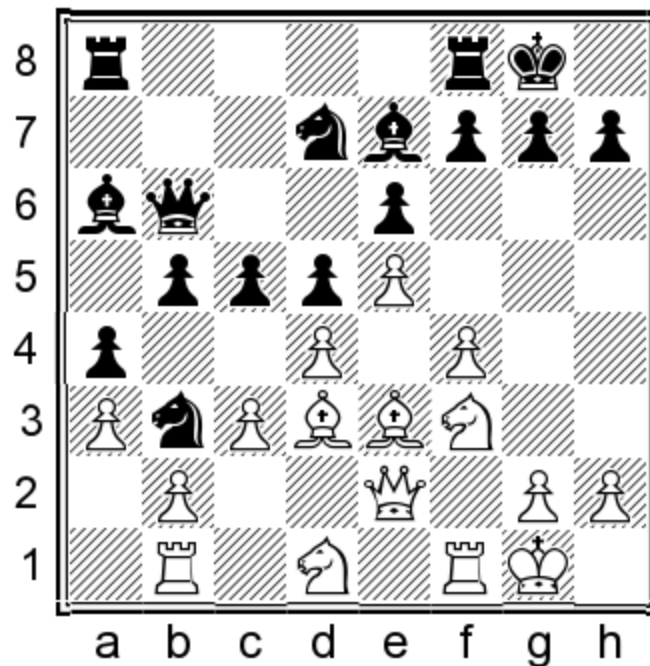
*Position after: 19.Nf2*

E.g. 19...Bd7 20.Nxe4 dxe4 21.Rfc1<sup>2</sup> White's advantage might not be huge but it is definitely very stable – their queenside pawn majority and Black's broken structure should tell in the long run.

### **14.Bd3 Na5**

14...Ba6 15.Nf2 Na5 16.Qe2 is quite similar, but gives White more options for the a1-rook.

### **15.Qe2 Nb3 16.Rb1 Ba6**



*Position after: 16...Ba6*

Black has achieved all they can on the queenside, and ...b4 is on the menu. All would be rosy were it not for a tiny tactical flaw...

**17.dxc5 Ndxc5**

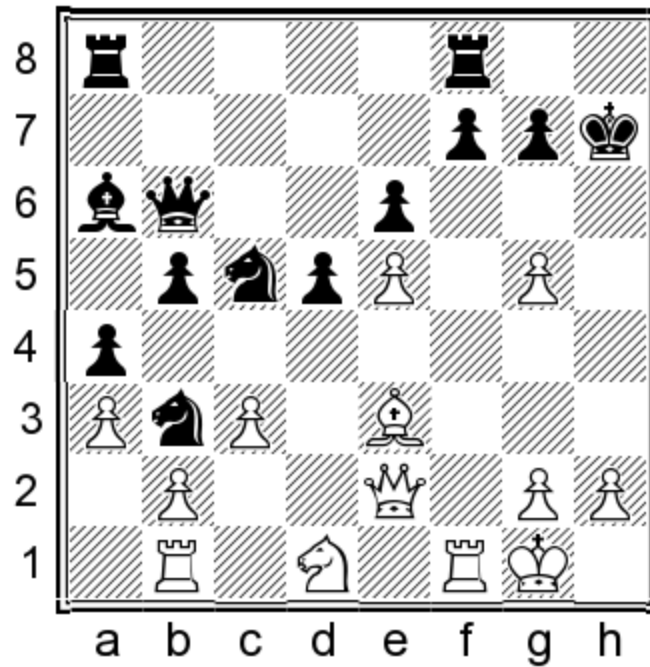
Black certainly does not wish to recapture with the active b3-knight and exchanging dark-squared bishops would be tantamount to positional suicide.

**18.Bxh7+!**

This brilliant piece sacrifice changes everything. Suddenly Black's king is in grave danger.

**18...Kxh7 19.Ng5+ Bxg5 20.fxg5**





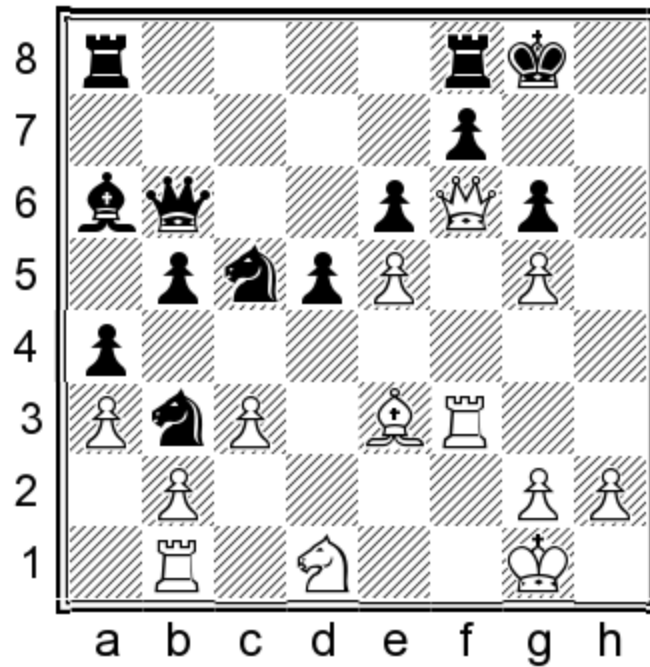
*Position after: 20.fxg5*

Although it is Black to move, they are unable to shift their pieces back to the queenside – as so often happens when the defender has less space. The immediate threat is Qh5+ & Rf1-f3-h3.

**20...g6 21.Qf2!**

Eyeing both the h4-square and the c5-knight.

**21...Kg7 22.Qf6+ Kg8 23.Rf3!**



*Position after: 23.Rf3!*

Black needs to take a very narrow path in order to just survive, not to mention trying to achieve full equality.

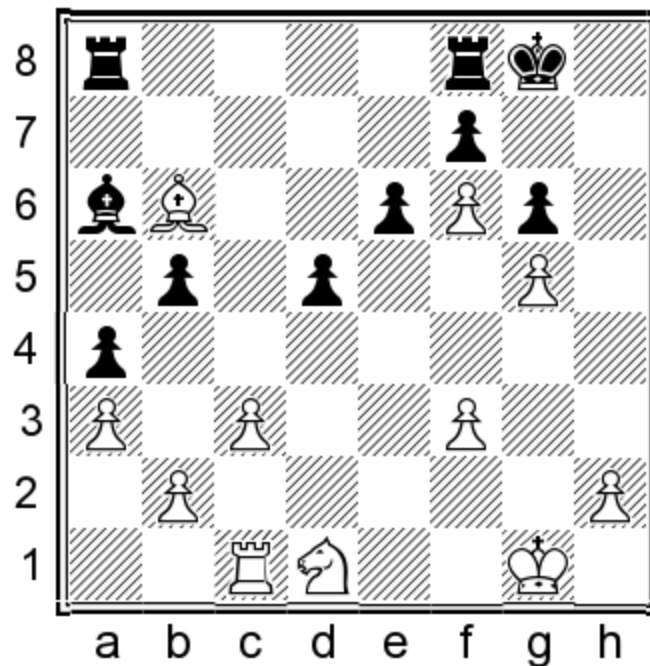
**23...Nd7**

23...Qd8 is worse as after 24.Rh3! Qxf6 25.gxf6, it is very difficult for Black to stop Bh6-g7 & Rh8 mate.

**24.Bxb6!**

It looks as if White overlooked the fact that they are losing an exchange, but let us look a bit further, beyond the horizon.

**24...Nxf6 25.exf6 Nd2 26.Rc1 Nxf3+ 27.gxf3<sup>2</sup>**

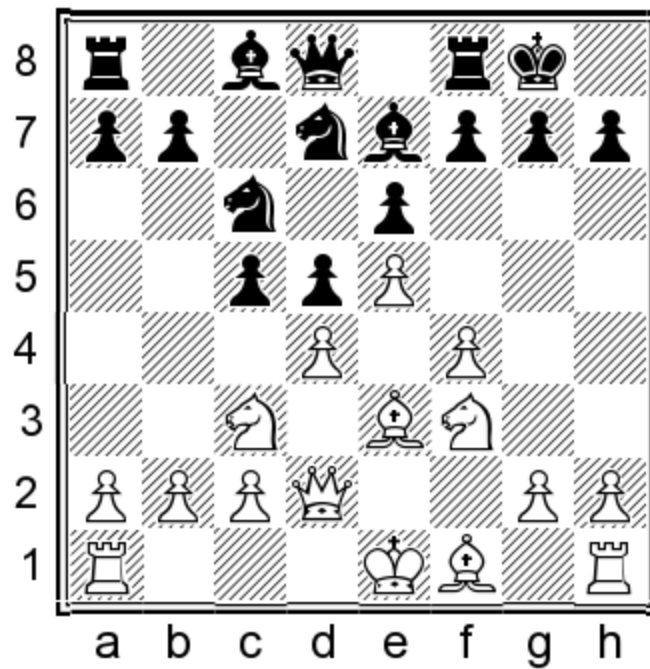


*Position after: 27.gxf3<sup>2</sup>*

Black is significantly worse even in this position – the difference in the activity of the respective bishops is immense. White's has a tremendous grip on the dark squares and once their knight joins the action (most likely via e3-g4-e5), it will be stronger than Black's prospectless rooks.

**c) 8...0-0**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2 0-0**

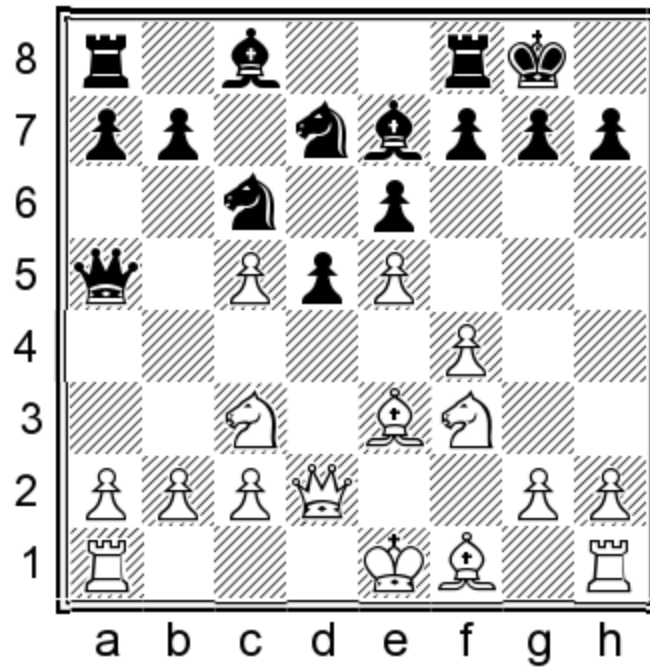


*Position after: 8...0-0*

### **9.dxc5**

Be careful not to land in the line 9.0-0-0? c4!μ which is simply terrible for White. Black's counterattack with ...b5 comes too fast here.

### **9...Qa5!?**



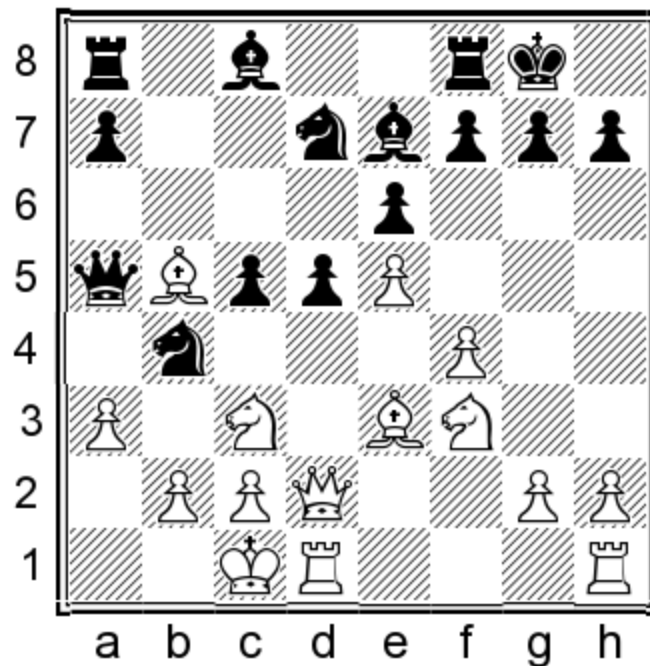
*Position after: 9...Qa5!?*

Before delving into analysis of the two principled recaptures on c5, let us have a look at this creative move as well.

Both 9...Nxc5 and 9...Bxc5 will be dealt with in the following chapters.

### 10.a3

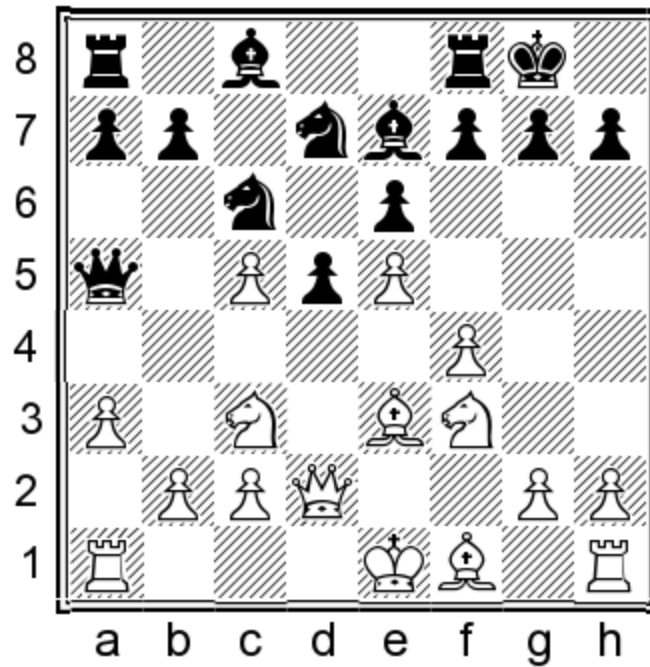
**A)** The problem with 10.0-0-0 is that things tend to get a bit overcomplicated for White after 10...b6! 11.Bb5 Nb4 12.a3 bxc5.



*Position after: 12...bxc5*

Matters get extremely messy and I was not able to find a clear edge, e.g. 13.Kb1 [13.Bxd7 gives Black tremendous compensation too: 13...Bxd7 14.axb4 cxb4 15.Nb1 Rfc8©] 13...a6 14.Bxd7 Bxd7 15.axb4 Qxb4©. I have cut my analysis significantly here, but bear in mind that the computer's initial evaluation might be deceiving and, in reality, the deeper you analyze, the less convincing White's material advantage seems to be.

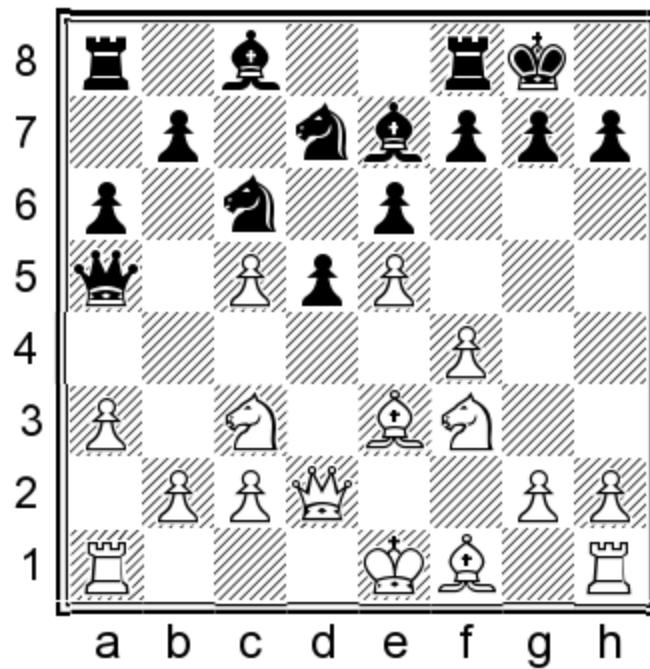
**B)** It is difficult to find an easy-to-learn workaround solution such as 10.Nb5 Qxd2+ 11.Nxd2 Nxc5 since endgames do not seem to be particularly troublesome for Black here.



*Position after: 10.a3*

### **10...Bxc5**

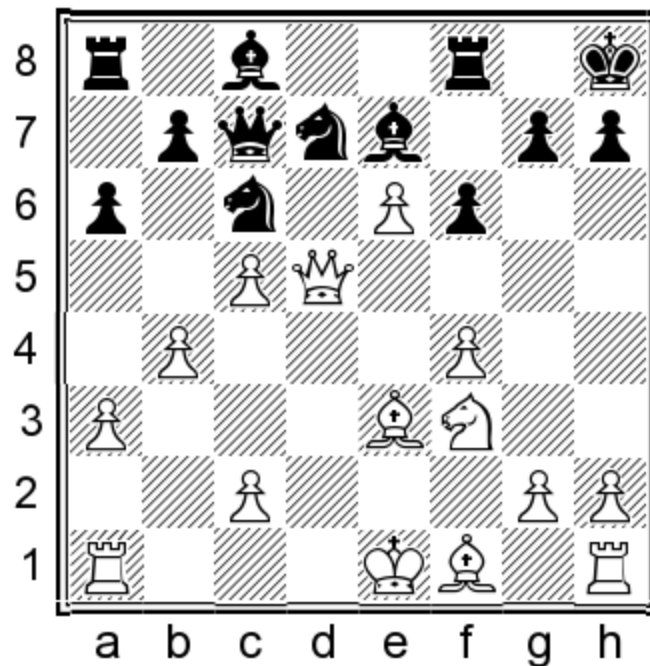
**A)** 10...a6!? could be quite venomous especially if one looks at the computer evaluation more than the board itself. There are, however, at least two calm paths White can comfortably walk.



*Position after: 10...a6!?*

**A1)** 11.Qd1?!, indirectly protecting the c5-pawn thanks to the threat of b2-b4, can backfire terribly in the ensuing tactical complications: 11...f6! 12.b4 Qc7 Now it looks as if White solves all their stability issues with 13.Nxd5! exd5 14.Qxd5+ Kh8 15.e6



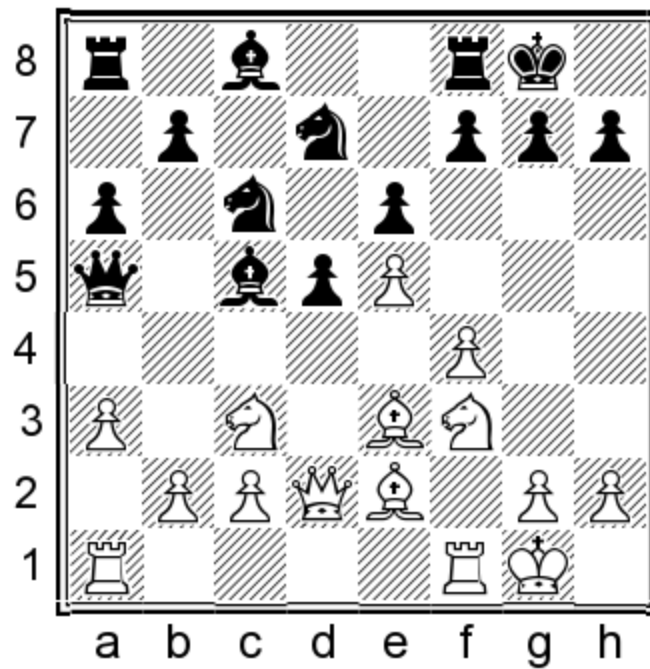


*Position after: 15.e6*

when the passive retreat ...Nd7-b8 grants the attacker a great edge. Yet things are far from being simple after 15...Nxc5! 16.bxc5 Bxe6! 17.Qxe6 Bxc5 18.Bxc5 Rfe8. It is true that, from the material point of view, White will have more than enough material for the queen, but their king will always be in great danger.

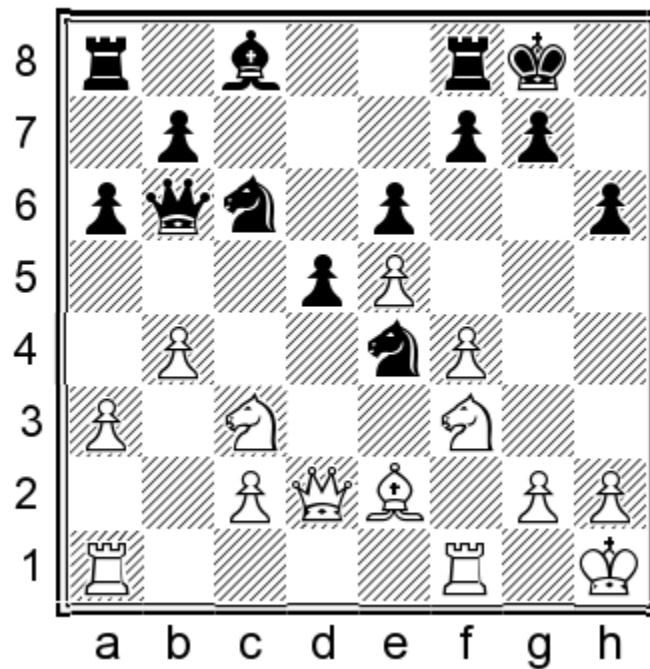
**A2)** 11.0-0-0?! spins totally out of control as well after 11...b6! 12.cxb6 Bxa3!.

**A3)** 11.Be2 is a good option for White that we shall consider. 11...Bxc5 12.0-0



*Position after: 12.0-0*

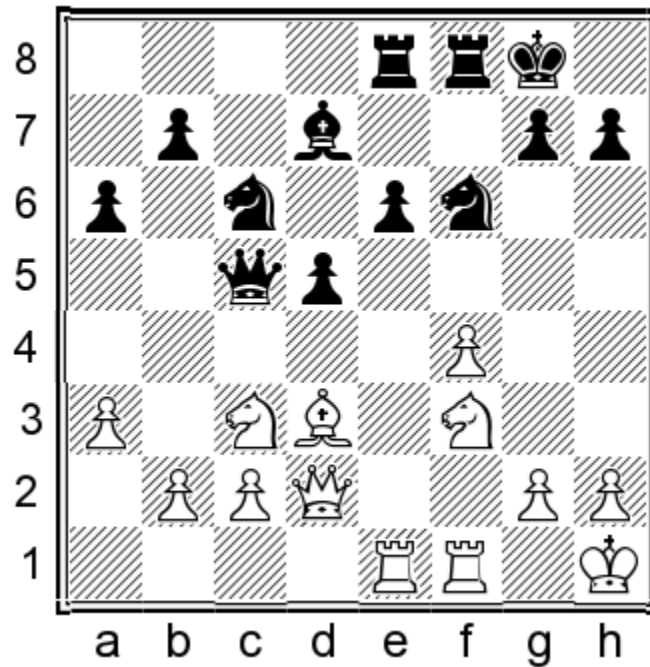
**A3.1)** Forcing White to exchange on c5 is nothing great for Black either. 12...Qb6 13.Bxc5 Nxc5 14.Kh1 h6! Without this resource Black would already be in big trouble but they remain worse nevertheless. 15.b4 Ne4



*Position after: 15...Ne4*

This is what Black was getting ready for – had their pawn been still on h7, White would simply capture the e4-knight and play Ng5. 16.Qe1 Nxc3 17.Qxc3 Bd7 18.Qd2<sup>2</sup> White has simple play with Bd3, preparing the f4-f5 advance, and they enjoy good coordination and more space.

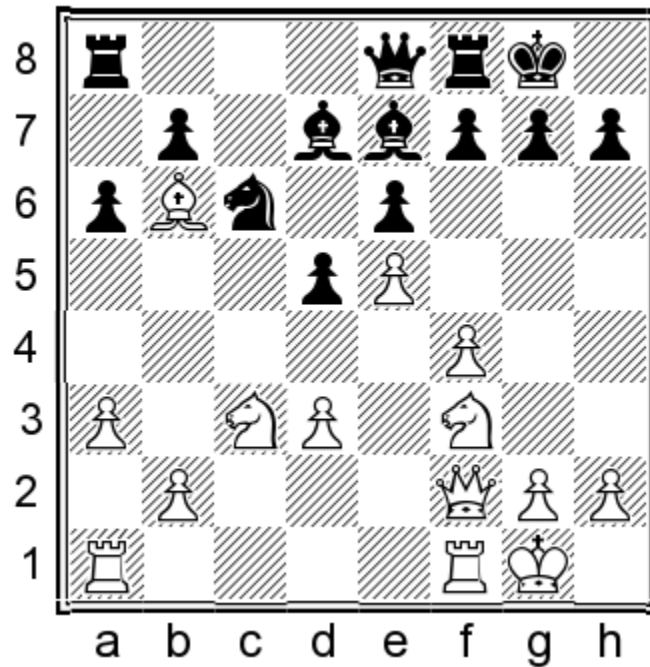
**A3.2)** 12...f6 13.exf6 Nxf6 14.Bxc5 Qxc5+ 15.Kh1 Bd7 16.Rae1 Rae8 17.Bd3<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 17.Bd3<sup>2</sup>*

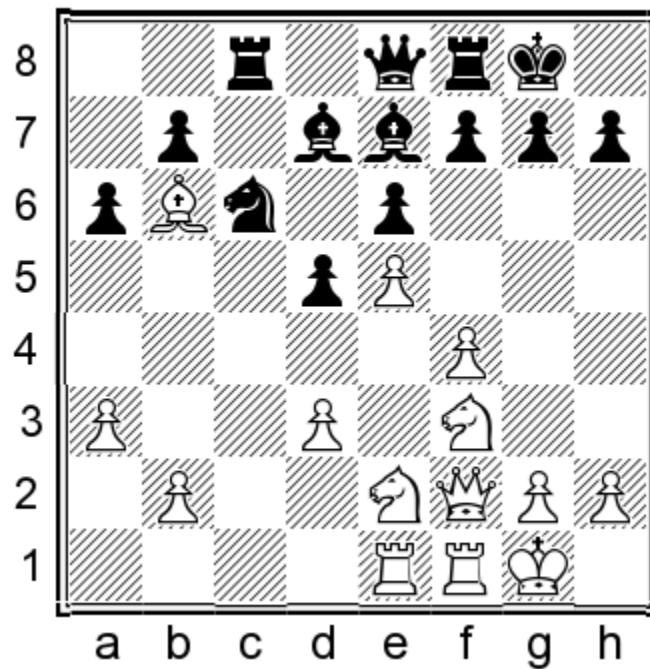
Exchanging the dark-squared bishop can hardly be considered an achievement for Black as it is the light-squared one which is an everlasting issue. White has nice central control over the weakened e5 and e6-squares.

**A4)** 11.Bd3 Two humble light-squared bishop moves should be sufficient for a nice long-term advantage.  
 11...Nxc5 12.0-0 Nxd3 13.cxd3 Bd7 14.Qf2 Qd8 15.Bb6 Qe8



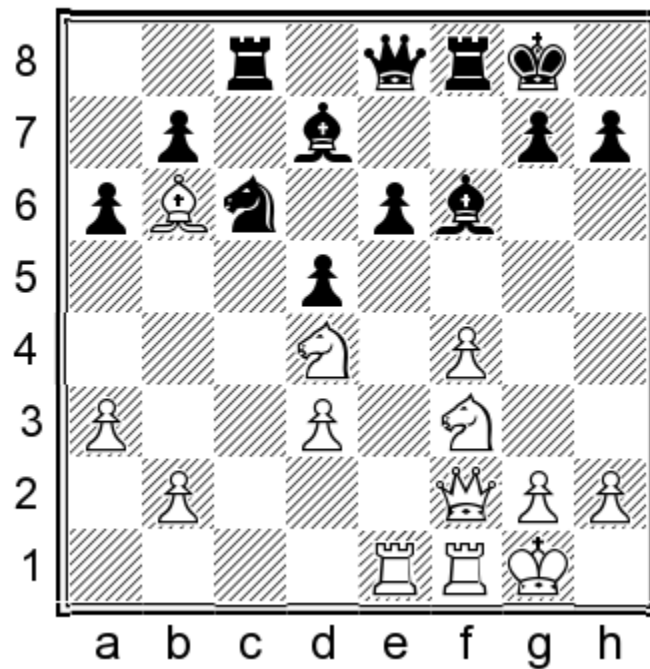
*Position after: 15...Qe8*

Black's position is rather cramped and their only plan is to play ...f6. Therefore White anticipates that move while finishing their development. 16.Rae1 [Truth be told, anything within reason like 16.Bc5 Rc8 17.Bxe7 Qxe7 18.Qb6<sup>2</sup> should be good for White, but I prefer exchanging the dark-squared bishops only after it is clear that Black will open the position with ... f6.] 16...Rc8 [16...f6 17.Bc5<sup>2</sup>] 17.Ne2 Still the same strategy.



*Position after: 17.Ne2*

Let Black enjoy their boxed-in pieces, do not give them air by allowing any exchanges, and make a useful move instead. 17...f6 18.exf6 Bxf6 [18...Rxf6 stops the planned Ned4 but we are happy to increase the dark-squared grip with 19.Bc5 Bd8 20.Bd6<sup>2</sup>.] 19.Ned4<sup>2</sup>

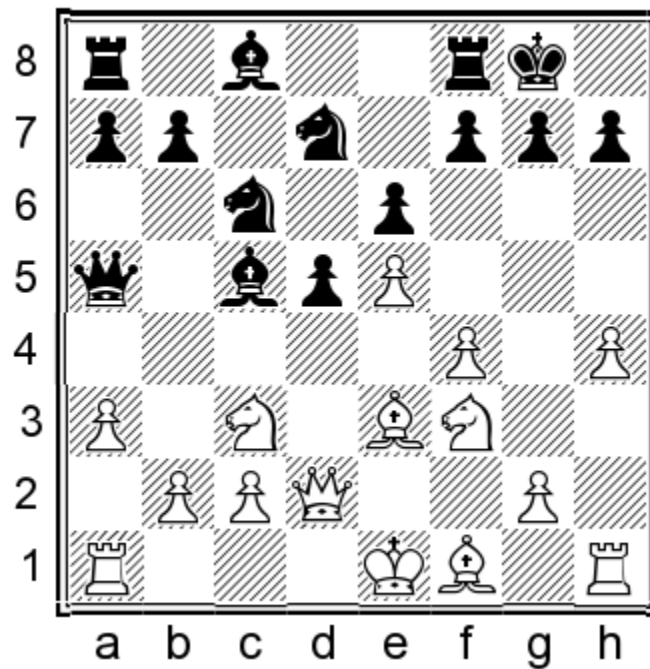


*Position after: 19.Ned4<sup>2</sup>*

The main thing you need to remember when facing this line is not to let yourself be provoked into going for complications and focus on getting a simple positional game instead.

**B)** Recapturing with the knight 10...Nxc5 makes no sense if White castles short – therefore 11.Be2. Black's opening turns out to be a positional debacle now since after their standard reaction of 11...f6, 12.0-0 forces them to retreat their c5-knight in a very ugly fashion due to the threats of b2-b4 or exf6.

**11.h4!**



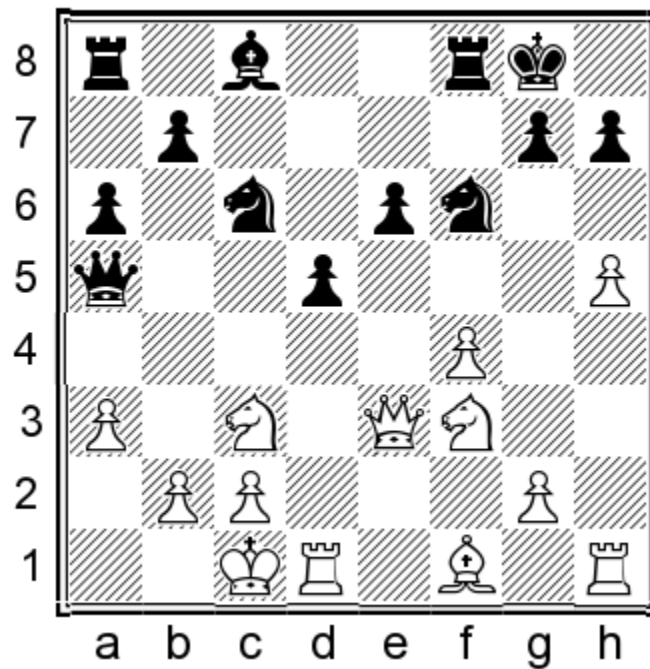
*Position after: 11.h4!*

You can play 11.0-0-0 too, which is a big line, but that would get you out of the scope of this book. Although Black is scoring poorly in this highly theoretical line, I have some doubts whether their score corresponds to the objective evaluation. The a2-a3 move does, after all, create a weakness in front of White's king. We will elaborate on this topic shortly in the following chapter. For the time being, let's focus on 11.h4!, which is not only quite rare, but also quite good for White!

## **11...a6**

**A)** Black can hardly punish their opponent by opening the position, e.g. 11...f6 12.exf6 Nxf6 13.0-0-0 a6 [13...Bxa3 14.bxa3 Qxa3+ 15.Kb1 Ng4 16.Bd4 Qb4+ 17.Ka1 Qa5+ 18.Na2+- leads nowhere.] 14.h5 Bxe3 15.Qxe3

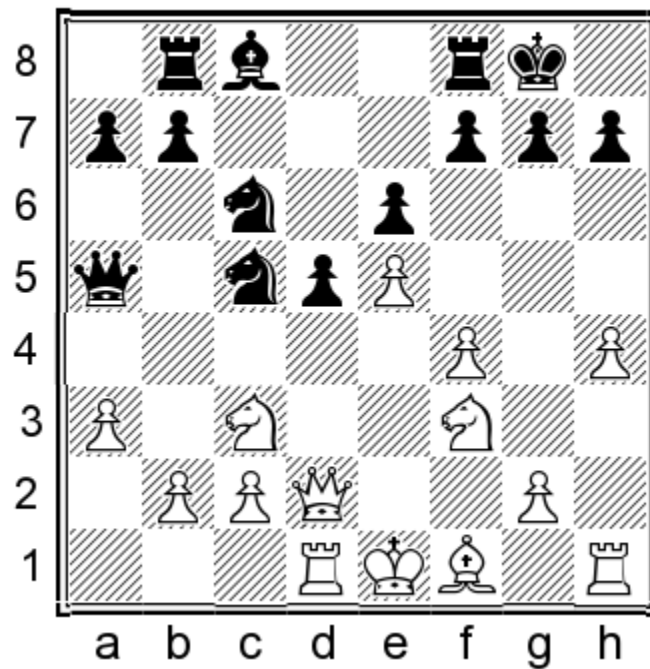




*Position after: 15.Qxe3*

Black's only achievement has been to create more weaknesses in their own camp. They fail to generate enough tactics, e.g. 15...Ng4 16.Qe1 Qb6 [16...Rxf4? drops material to 17.Qg3 Qc7 18.Rh4+-] 17.Rd2<sup>2</sup>, and White will easily consolidate and then turn their attention to focusing on Black's weak central pawns and dark squares.

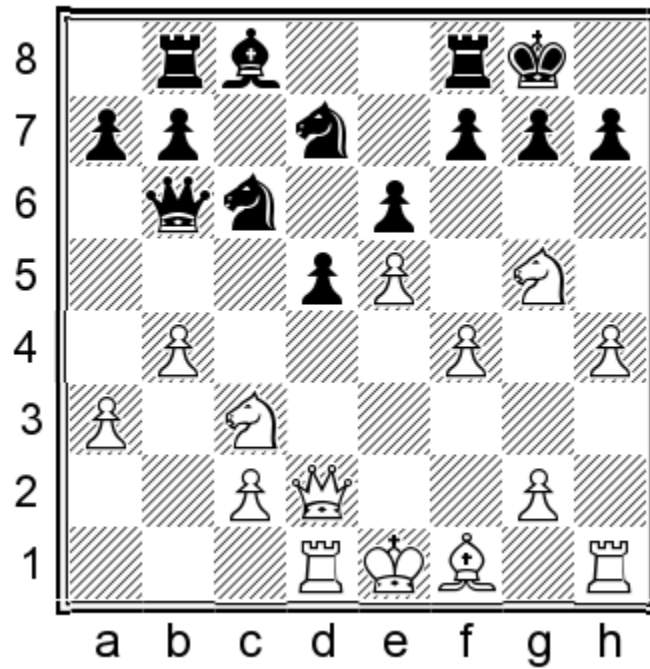
**B)** 11...Rb8, trying to outsmart White by playing ...b5 in one go, fails spectacularly after 12.Bxc5 Nxc5 13.Rd1! when Black needs to retreat most of their forces.



*Position after: 13.Rd1!*

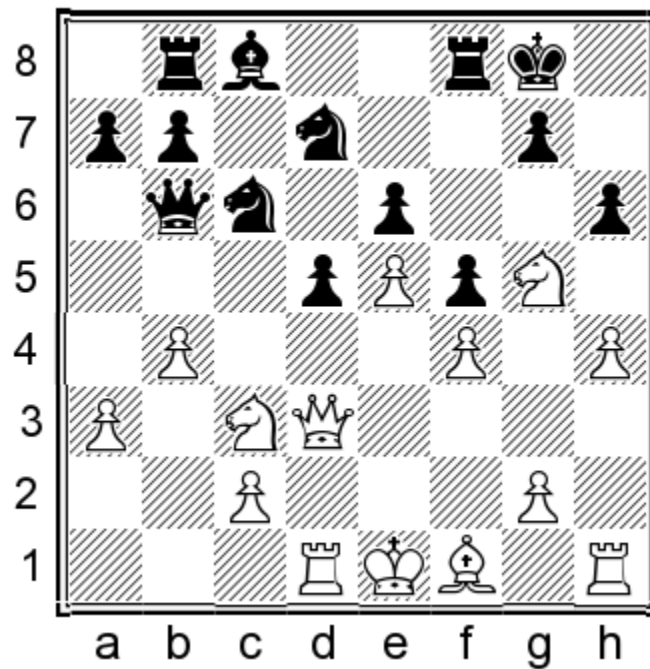
**B1)** 13...Nd7 14.Nb5 Qxd2+ 15.Kxd2<sup>2</sup> leads to a clearly better endgame - Black is usually worse even when there are fewer pieces on the board. Considering their lack of space, they will find it even more difficult to find squares for their numerous passive pieces.

**B2)** 13...Qb6 14.b4 Nd7 15.Ng5!



*Position after: 15.Ng5!*

A familiar motif: the idea is to play Qd3. 15...h6 16.Qd3! f5 [16...hxg5 17.hxg5 Rd8 18.Qh7+ Kf8 19.Rh3!+-, stopping ...Qe3+, leaves Black completely helpless against Qh8xg7 or g5-g6.]



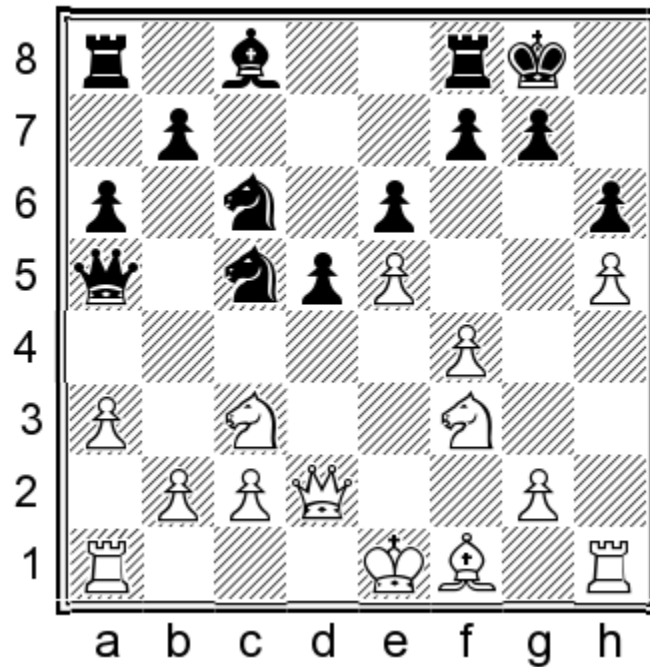
*Position after: 16...f5*

**B2.1)** 17.Nf3!<sup>2</sup>

**B2.2)** There is no need to enter the mess ensuing after 17.Nxe6! Ndx6 18.Qxd5 Re8 19.Nc7+ Be6!. White should simply enjoy their great positional pluses, their pieces being much more active than their opponent's, and Black's light squares being extremely weak. One should never complicate matters unnecessarily.

## 12.h5 h6

This shows White's idea in the purest form. By pushing h4-h5 before castling they forced Black to commit to the weakening ...h6. Now they can proceed with finishing development by playing 13.Bxc5 Nxc5



*Position after: 13...Nxc5*

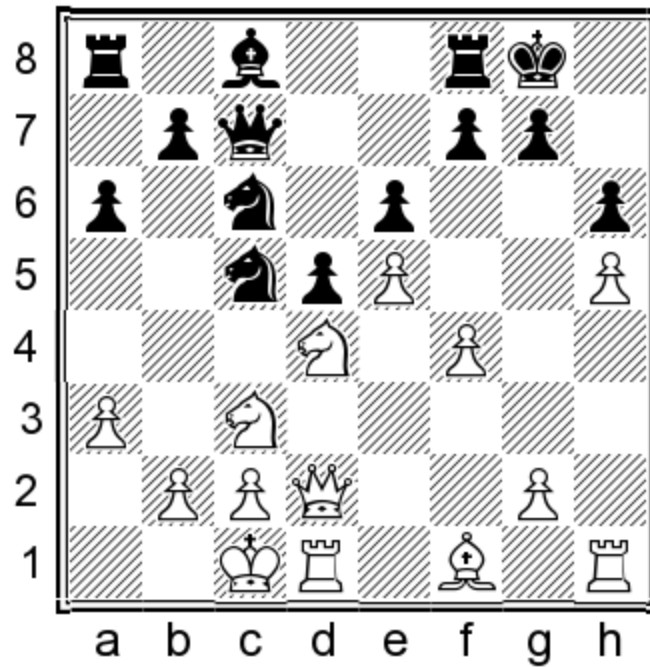
### **14.Nd4!**

Gaining another useful tempi as after 14.0-0-0 Black can play 14...b5 straight away. Not so easy to do when the c6-knight is still hanging.

### **14...Qc7**

Note that White's previous move set the primitive trap of 14...Bd7?? 15.Nxc6 Bxc6 16.b4+-.

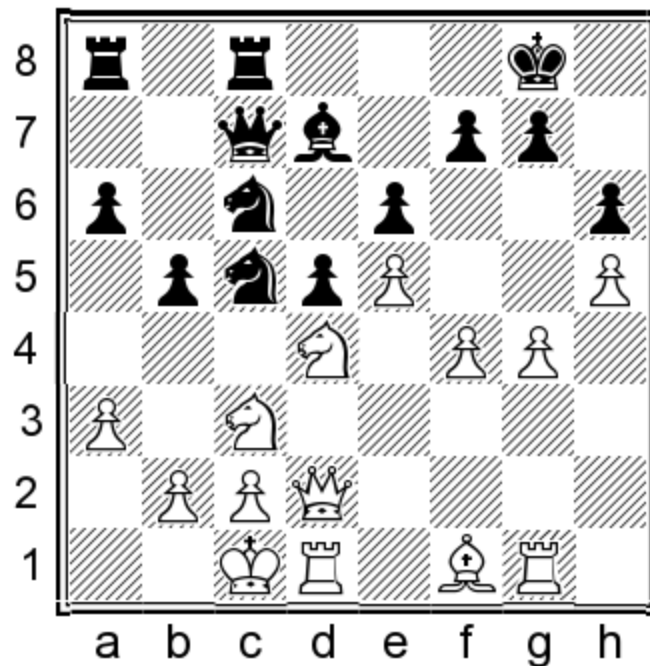
### **15.0-0-0**



*Position after: 15.0-0-0*

### **15...Bd7**

Only this set-up forces White to show some precision, otherwise the g4-g5 attack comes devilishly fast. For example, after 15...b5 16.g4 Bd7 17.Rg1 Rfc8



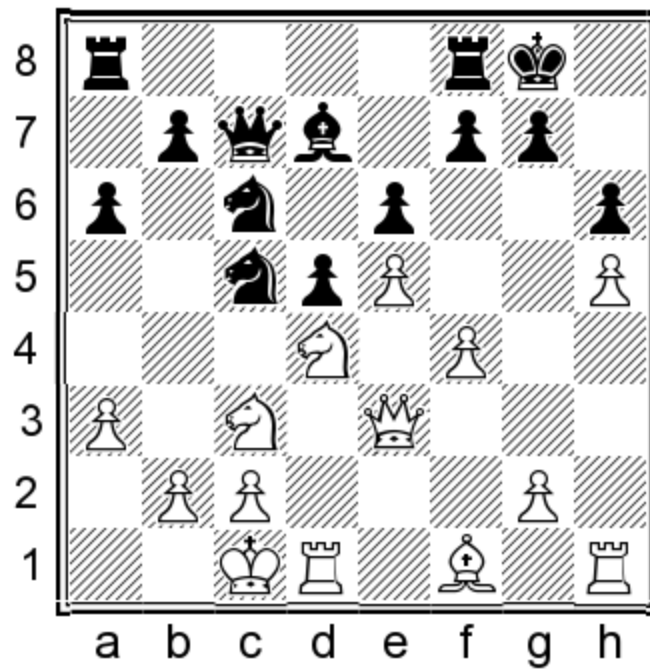
*Position after: 17...Rfc8*

18.Nxc6! (stopping the ...Ne4 trick) 18...Bxc6 19.g5, it is already basically game over for Black.

### **16.Qe3!**

The idea is simple, removing the tension in the center by capturing on c6 – ideally without Black having the chance to recapture by the b-pawn. After that White can peacefully finish their opponent off by pushing the g-pawn.

White would like to play 16.g4 Rac8 17.Rg1?, but this allows Black's prepared trap of 17...Ne4! 18.Nxe4 Nxd4! when things start spinning out of control.



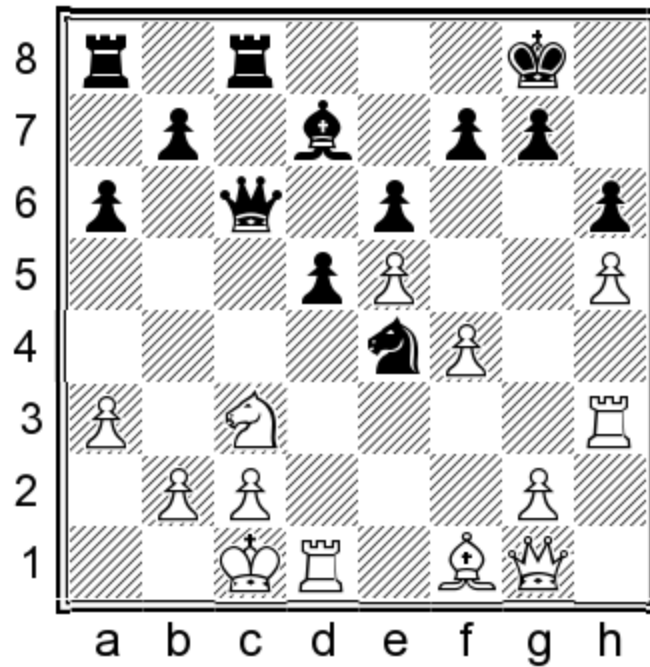
*Position after: 16.Qe3!*

**16...Rfc8 17.Nxc6 Qxc6 18.Rh3!**

Needless to say, 18.g4?? d4-+ would be quite horrible.

**18...Ne4 19.Qg1!**





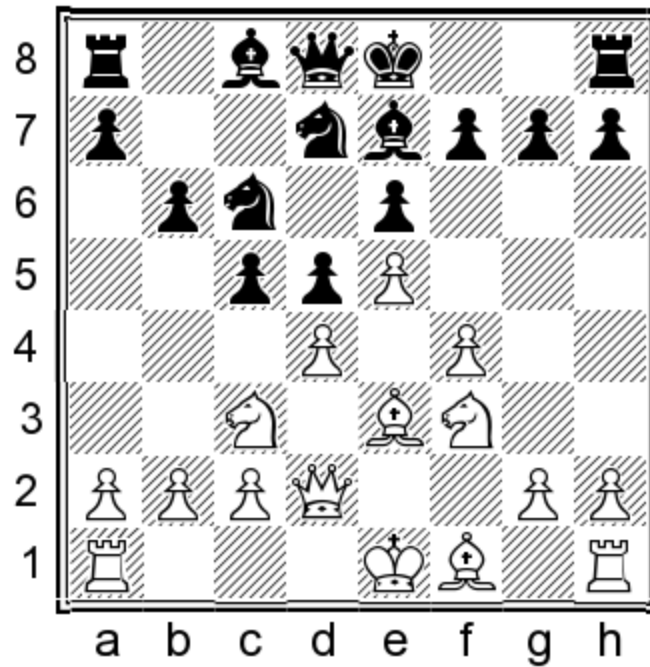
*Position after: 19.Qg1!*

Neatly securing the c3-knight and getting ready for opening the g-file. Everything is ready for g2-g4 and now it is White's turn to have some fun.

**d) 8...b6!?**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2**

Last but not least, we come to 8...b6!?



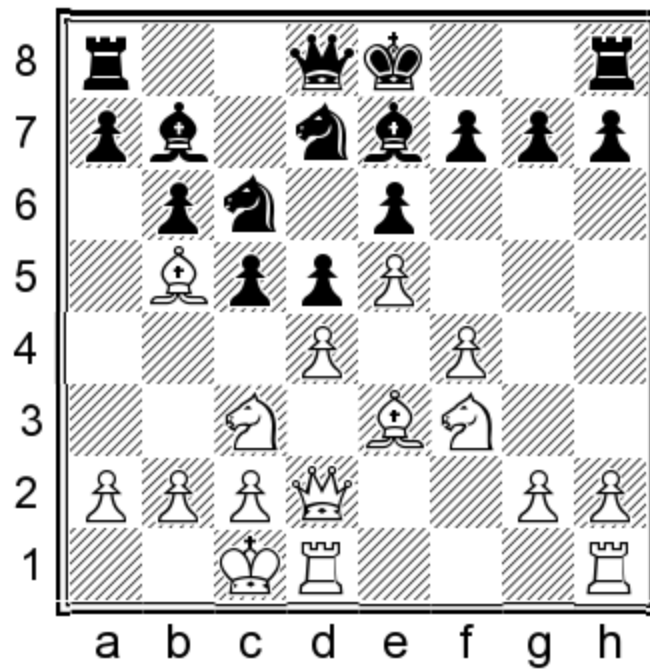
*Position after: 8...b6!?*

Considering our intention is to capture on c5 should Black opt for 8...0-0 instead. This can be considered Black's last chance of engineering the ...b6 set-up. Combining ...b6 with ...Nc6 gives us some extra options though!

## **9.Bb5!**

In this case we can utilize Black's clumsiness on the queenside for quick development and f4-f5. In practical play White's results have been unanimously positive too.

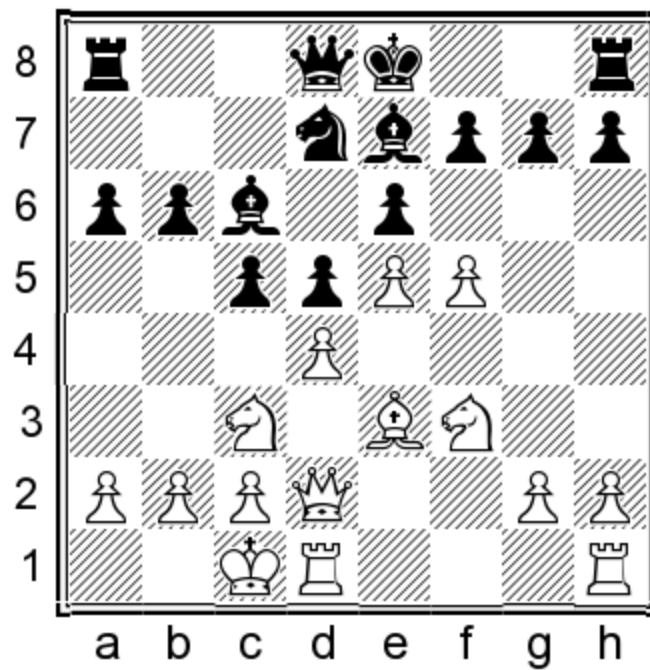
## **9...Bb7 10.0-0-0**



*Position after: 10.0-0-0*

**10...Rc8**

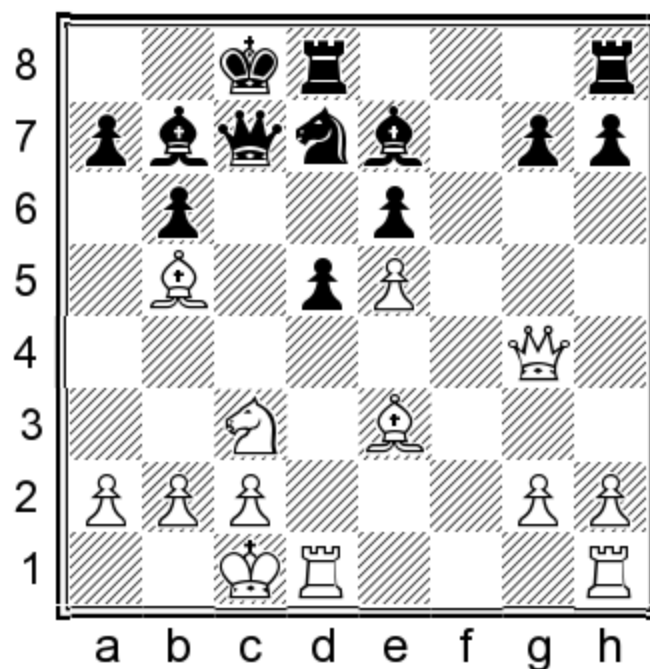
**A) 10...a6 11.Bxc6 Bxc6 12.f5!**



*Position after: 12.f5!*

shows the main idea behind Bb5. Black cannot afford to lose so much time but the half-waiting moves we are examining bring them little joy as well. 12...exf5 13.dxc5 bxc5 14.Nxd5 0-0 15.Rhe1± White's pieces are brilliantly coordinated while Black's position is just horribly passive and fundamentally broken. But if Black cannot afford to push the b5-bishop away, their prospects are dire.

**B)** 10...Qc7, intending to castle long, can be answered by the immediate 11.f5!, for example 11...cxd4 12.Nxd4 Nxd4 13.Qxd4 0-0-0 14.fxe6 fxe6 15.Qg4, as already played in Marti Pericot – Obertin, email 2012.



*Position after: 15.Qg4*

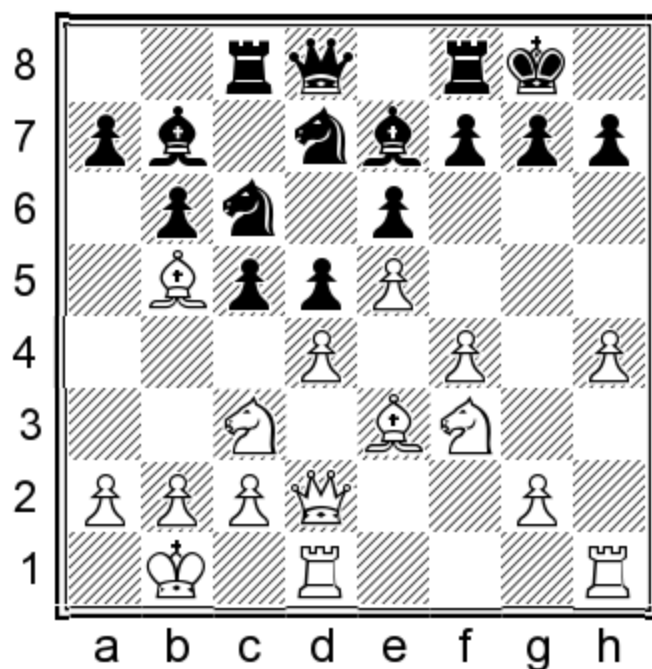
15...Qxe5 [The game was eventually drawn after 15...Nc5 16.Bd4± but Black's position is extremely awkward, as they have close to zero active counterplay. The e6 and g7-

pawns are very weak, as is the f7-square.] 16.Rhe1 Nc5 17.Bxc5 Qg5+ 18.Qxg5 Bxg5+ 19.Kb1 bxc5 20.Rxe6<sup>2</sup> Black's central pawn formation is very precarious and White will either remove its support by Bb5-c6 or start attacking it with Nc3-a4.

## 11.Kb1

Black will play ...a6 at some point anyway so White is making a move which should be useful in any case. Now that it is clear Black will castle kingside, they could have also started with h2-h4.

## 11...0-0 12.h4



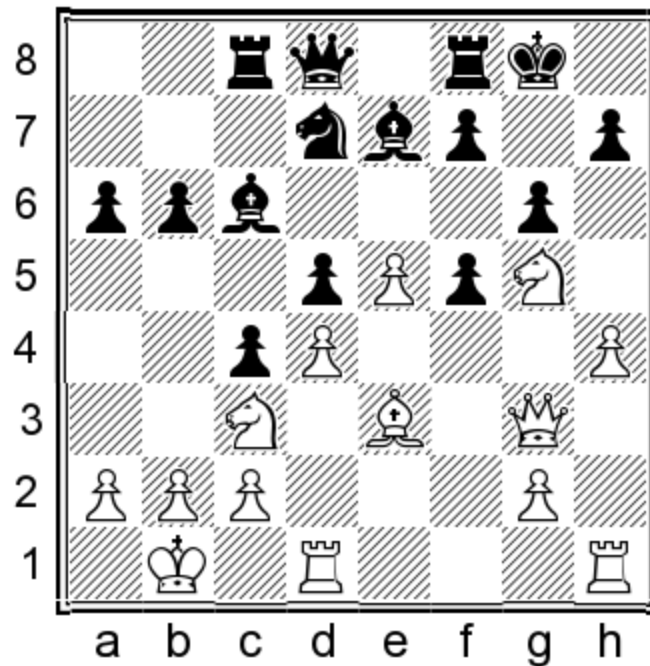
*Position after: 12.h4*

Black's counterplay is very slow here compared to the standard attacking flow, e.g.

**12...a6 13.Bxc6 Bxc6 14.Ng5!**

with the idea of provoking a weakness on the kingside with Qd3. Note that 14...c4 fails to

**15.f5! exf5 16.Qf2 g6 17.Qg3**



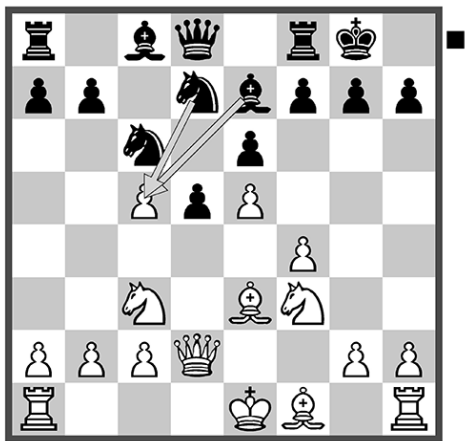
*Position after: 17.Qg3*

White will simply blast through Black's defenses with h4-h5.

# Chapter 12

## Mainline with ...Bxc5 & ...Nxc5

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2 0-0 9.dxc5**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 12 - Mainline with ...Bxc5 & ...Nxc5

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2 0-0 9.dxc5

a) 9...Bxc5

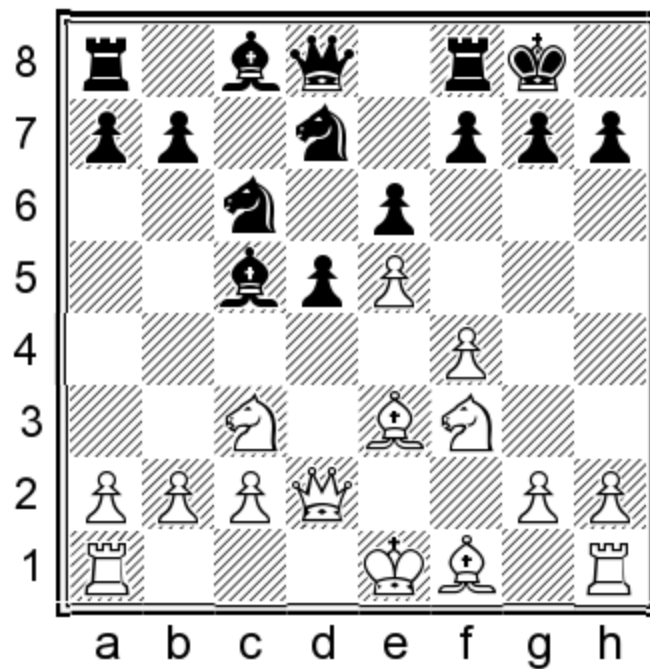
b) 9...Nxc5

### a) 9...Bxc5

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2 0-0 9.dxc5**

Let's have a look at the slightly less natural capture first.

### 9...Bxc5



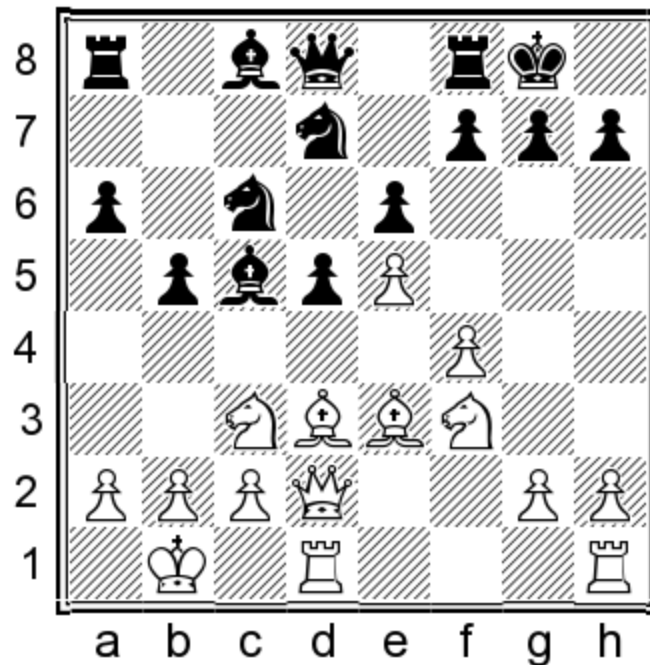


*Position after: 9...Bxc5*

The problem with this move is that it is often very difficult for Black to continue developing the rest of their queenside, namely the d7-knight and the c8-bishop. Thus, they often find themselves maneuvering awkwardly with ...Bxc5-Be7, desperately trying to get some coordination.

### 10.0-0-0 Qa5

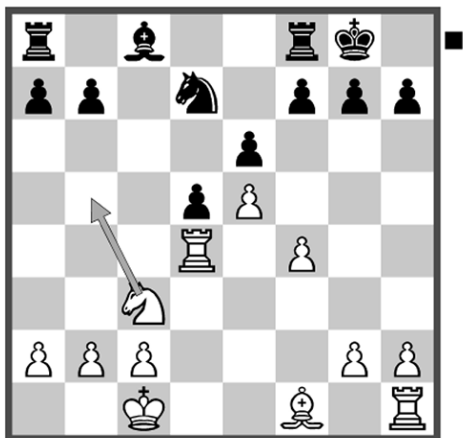
**A)** Besides the most active queen move Black has a couple of other options as well. 10...a6 does not bother White too much after 11.Kb1 b5 12.Bd3!



*Position after: 12.Bd3!*

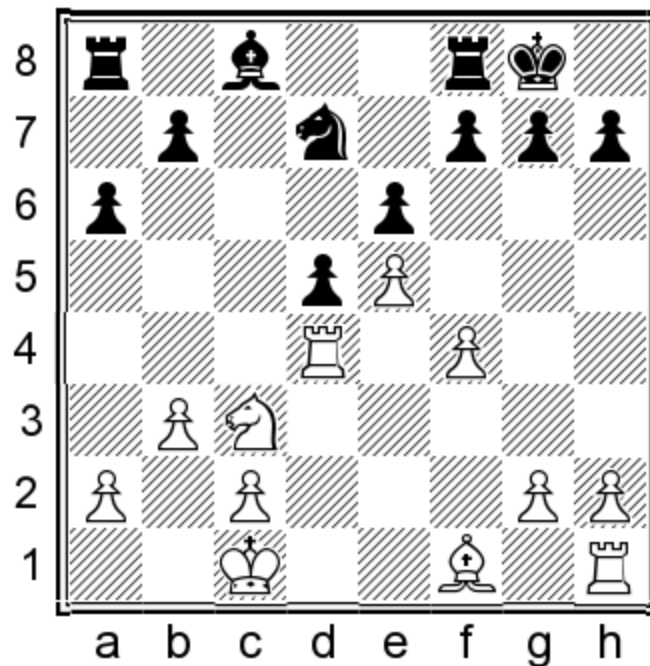
as they manage to develop harmoniously here. They are already threatening Bxh7+ (with Ng5+ & Qd3 to follow) and the tactical point behind their last move is that 12...d4? loses material in view of 13.Nxd4! Nxd4 14.Be4+-.

**B)** 10...Qb6 is a very solid alternative to the text move but the game tends to be pretty one-sided. Black basically agrees to defend the following endgame. 11.Nd4 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 Bxd4 13.Qxd4 Qxd4 14.Rxd4



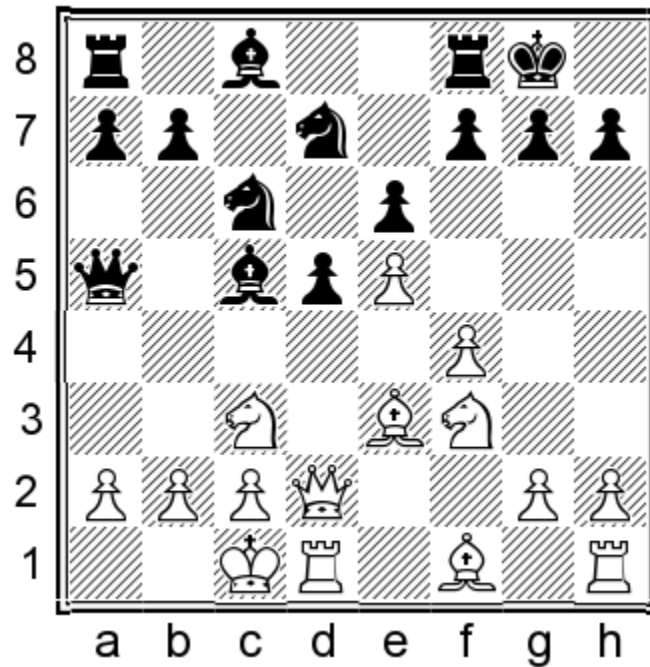
*Position after: 14.Rxd4*

Such endings tend to be quite unpleasant for Black as a rule, even though Black has managed to exchange some material. If all the minor pieces disappeared from the board (especially the knights) they would be fine, but here their position remains cramped. 14...a6 White probably wasn't threatening to maneuver their knight to d6 yet – after all, it would feel a bit lonely there, isolated from the rest of White's army, but it makes sense to discourage such jumps anyway. Black is hoping to deal with their opening trouble with ...b6, and ...Ra7-c7. 15.b3!



*Position after: 15.b3!*

The start of a nice regrouping. White takes the c4-square under control, brings their king closer to the main battlefield, and then maneuvers their knight to a more active position on e3. Under favorable conditions they can toy with the c2-c4 advance as well, converting their spatial advantage into activity. 15...b6 16.Kb2 Ra7 17.Nd1! Rc7 18.Ne3<sup>2</sup> White has a lasting advantage. Unless there is some forcing tactical solution, they should not rush anything and focus on slowly improving their position with small moves like Be2, h4, or a4, gradually increasing the pressure on both flanks. While they can improve their position as much as they like, Black is condemned to a rather passive role as any attempt for active play – such as ...f7-f6 – would severely weaken their position.



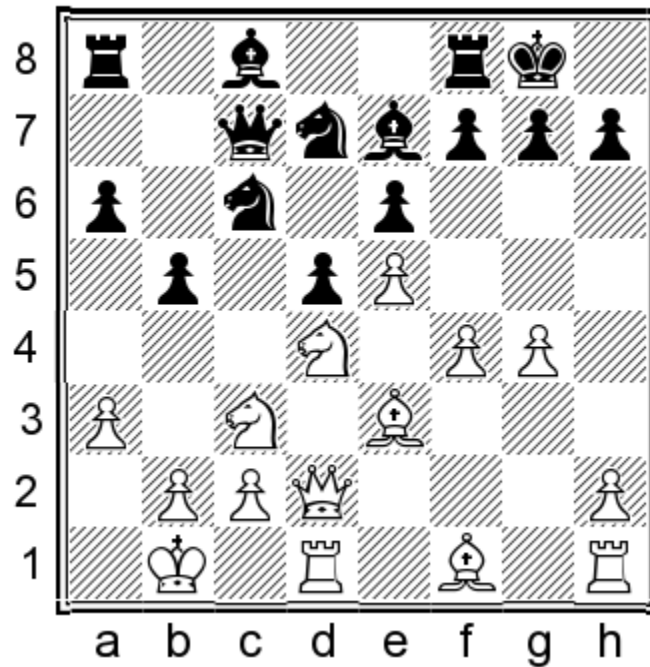
*Position after: 10...Qa5*

## **11.h4!**

We will follow the deep theoretical paths precisely in the 9...Nxc5 line, but here I'd like to suggest a rather innovative approach instead. The whole 11. h4 system has been played very rarely, although with decent results for White.

**A)** Let us first explore the theoretical line 11.a3 a little. Black's attack gets a bit stuck here but the a3-move could prove to be a weakness. 11...Be7 [After 11...a6 12.Bxc5! Nxc5 13.Qe3 Bd7 14.f5! White is a useful a2-a3 tempo up compared to the 11.Bxc5 note which grants them great attacking chances.]

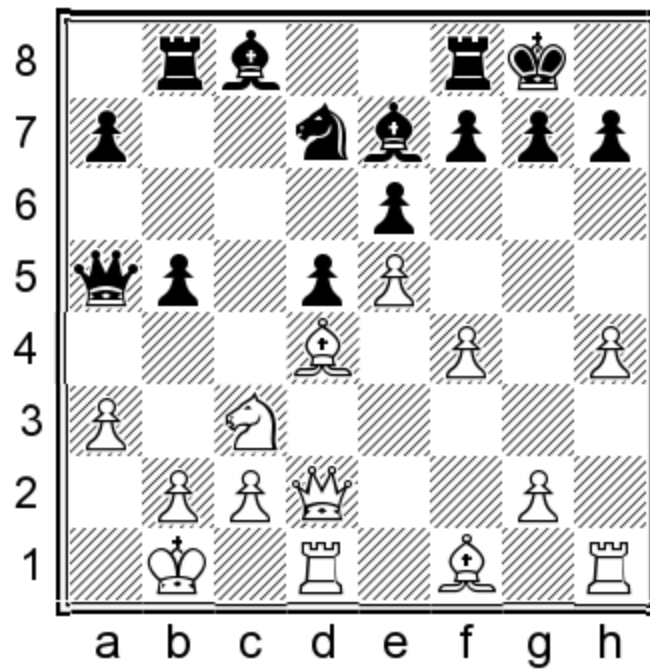
**A1)** Using the above-mentioned awkward maneuver ...Bc5-e7, Black can hope to get some counterplay after 12.Kb1 a6 13.Nd4 Qc7 14.g4 b5.



*Position after: 14...b5*

Although Black has had to make a couple of rather passive moves, they will finally make good use of White's queenside weakening, e.g. 15.Nxc6 Qxc6 16.Bd4 b4 17.axb4 Bxb4 18.f5 and it is not easy to prove an advantage for White nor to claim their position is easier to play – everything is hanging by a thread and the game could go either way. 18...Bc5 19.Bxc5 Qxc5 20.f6 Nxe5∞

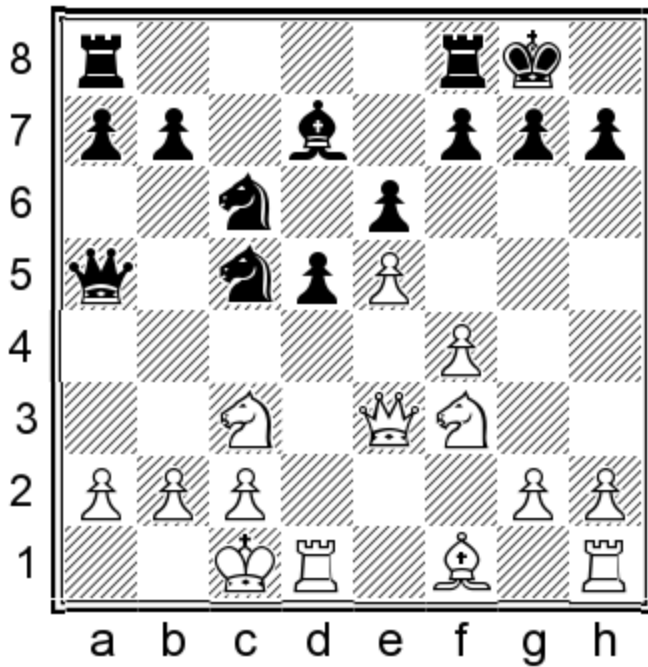
**A2)** To be fair, White has been rather successful with 12.h4!? lately as well, for example 12...Rb8 13.Nd4 Nxd4 14.Bxd4 b5 15.Kb1!



*Position after: 15.Kb1!*

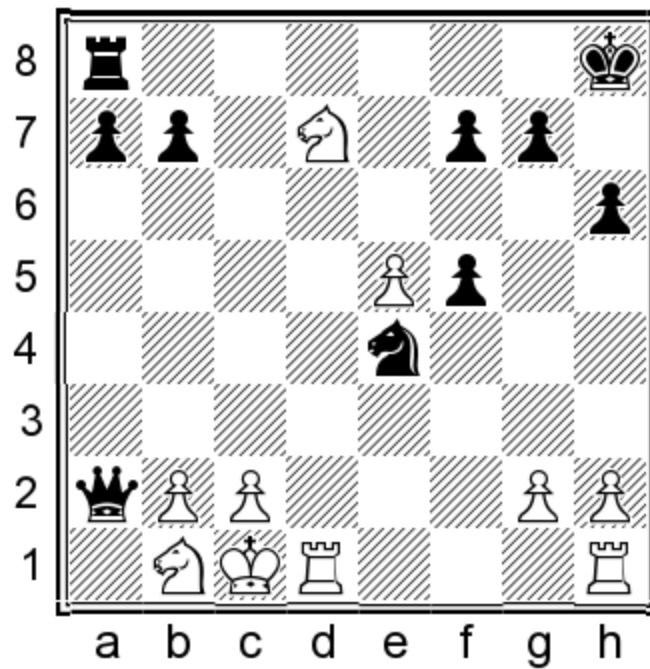
and Black is not going anywhere due to 15...b4 16.Na2! Qa4 17.axb4 Bxb4 18.Nxb4 Rxb4 19.Rh3!± This leads to a logical question though - why does White need the move 11.a3 at all?

**B)** There are other approaches that White can try out, such as 11.Bxc5 Nxc5 12.Qe3 Bd7,



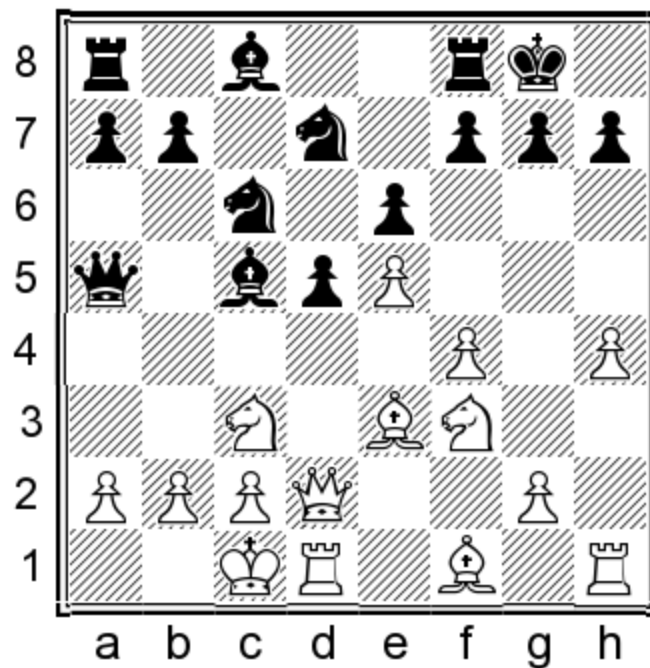
*Position after: 12...Bd7*

but let us focus instead on the main recommendation. I will just note that this should be compared to the 11...Rb8 line in the text - in the critical 13.f5 Qb6 14.Qg5 h6 15.Qg3 exf5 16.Nxd5 Qa5 17.Nf6+ Kh8 18.Nxd7 Ne4 19.Qh3 Qxa2 20.Nd2 Qa1+ 21.Nb1 Nb4 22.Bc4 Rfc8! 23.Qb3 Rxc4 24.Qxc4 Na2+ 25.Qxa2 Qxa2-+



*Position after: 25...Qxa2-+*

it finally turns out Black is completely winning because their rook is not hanging on b8 or f8!



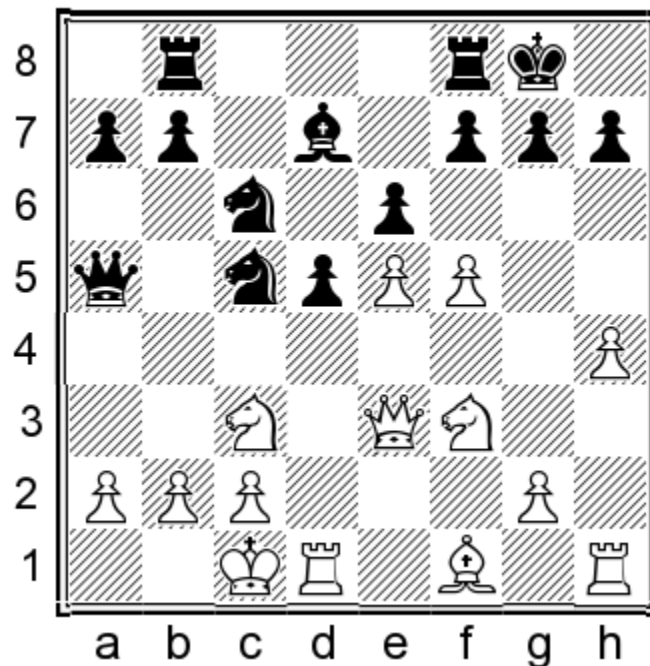


*Position after: 11.h4!*

### **11...Bb4**

The logical “punishment” for White omitting a2-a3 does not work as well as Black would like. Yet upon further inspection it turns out that Black’s dark-squared bishop is too precious to be given up just like this and the defender will suffer endlessly in an unpleasant endgame.

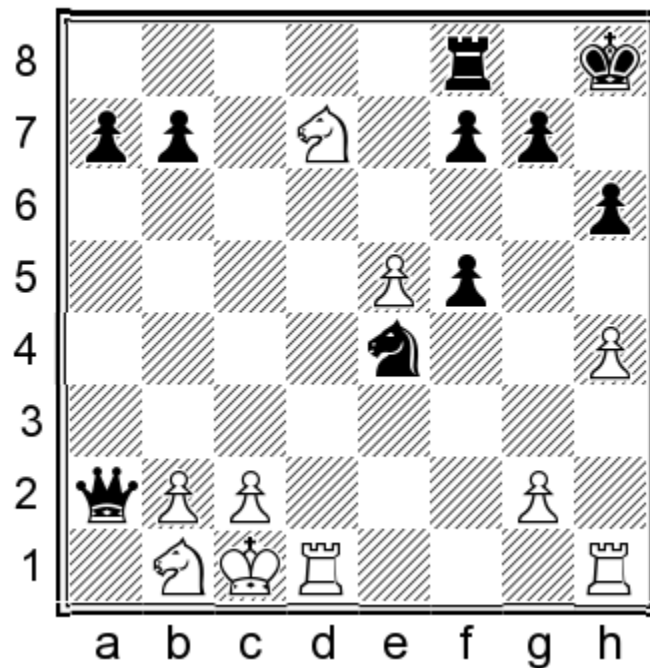
**A)** 11...Rb8 12.Bxc5 Nxc5 13.Qe3 Bd7 14.f5! is an improved version of the 11.Bxc5 system.



*Position after: 14.f5!*

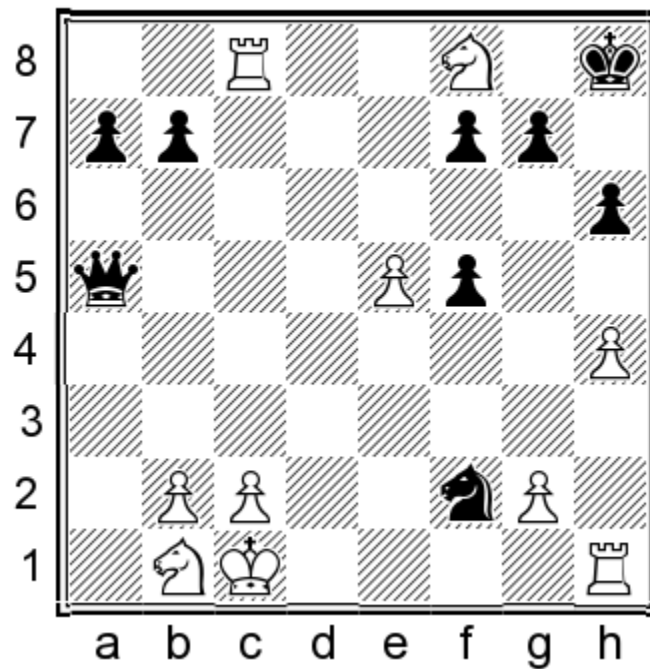
The h4-pawn often contributes to the attack against Black’s king and the b8-rook turns out to be not so well placed either. 14...Qb6 15.Qg5 h6 16.Qg3 exf5 is the critical try for Black but this time they are losing by force. 17.Nxd5 Qa5 18.Nf6+ Kh8 19.Nxd7 Ne4 20.Qh3 Qxa2

21.Nd2 Qa1+ 22.Nb1 Nb4 23.Bc4 Rbc8 24.Qb3 Rxc4  
 25.Qxc4 Na2+ 26.Qxa2 Qxa2



*Position after: 26...Qxa2*

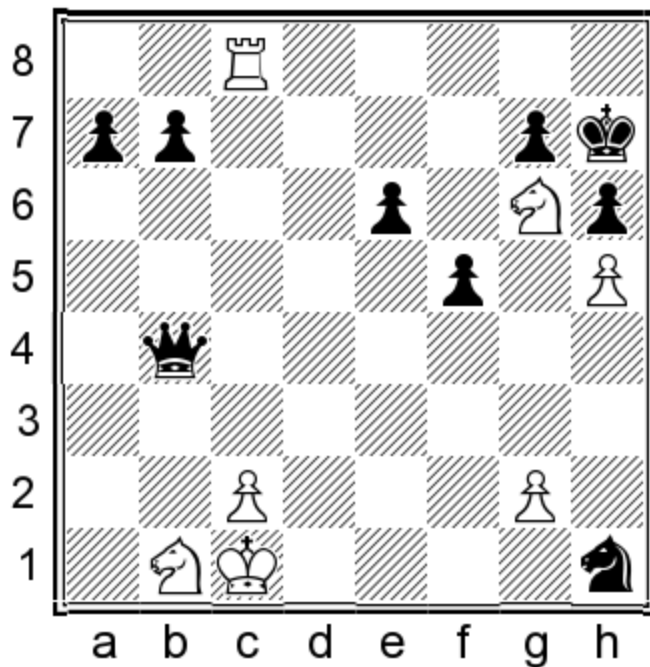
27.Nxf8 Nf2 28.Rd8 Qa5 [28...Nxb1 29.h5!, tightening the mating net, shows another finesse behind the h4-push.]  
 29.Rc8!



*Position after: 29.Rc8!*

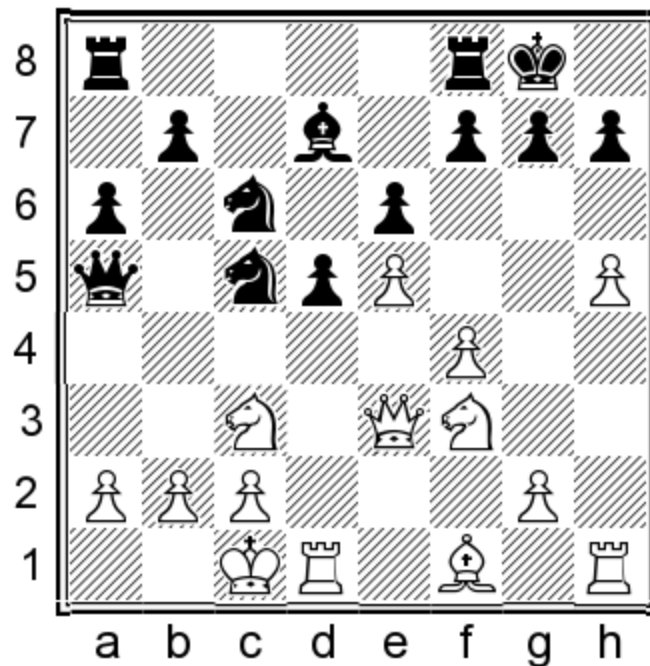
Black is completely busted here, as is confirmed by the initially skeptical silicon beasts as well. The final brilliancy is 29...Nxb4 30.b4! (making some room for the c1-king) 30...Qxb4 31.e6! fxe6 [31...Nf2 32.h5!, with the killer

threat of Ng6+.] 32.Ng6+ Kh7 33.h5!+-



*Position after: 33.h5!+- and it's all over – White's king will hide on a2. It is highly unlikely you will ever get so far in a practical game, but it is nonetheless nice to know that our tactics are in order!*

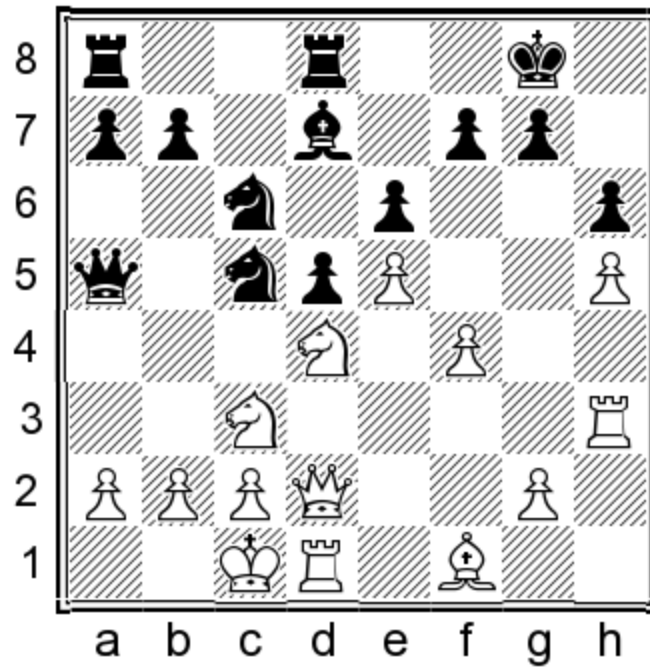
**B)** One tempo is all it takes for White to gain a decisive attack on the kingside, e.g. 11...a6 12.Bxc5! Nxc5 13.Qe3 Bd7 14.h5



*Position after: 14.h5*

is already very nasty. Black cannot really afford to give up their dark squares by allowing White to play h5-h6 but 14...h6 gives White a clear target and simple play after 15.g4!. It is hard to imagine Black can survive the onslaught after, say, 15...Na4 16.Nxa4 Qxa4 17.Bd3! Qxa2 18.g5 hxg5 19.Rhg1,.

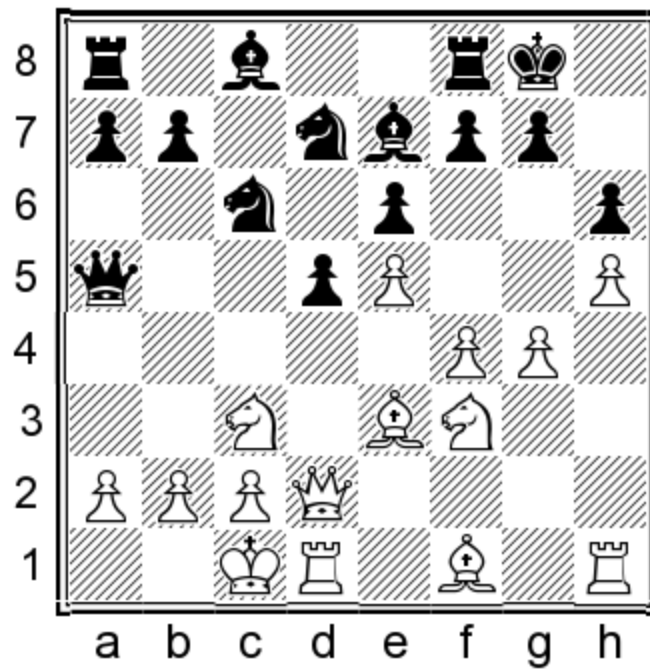
**C)** 11...Rd8 changes very little, as White only needs to watch out for the ...d4-push. This is best achieved by playing the standard 12.Bxc5 Nxc5 and then following up with 13.Nd4 Bd7 14.h5 h6 15.Rh3!



*Position after: 15.Rh3!*

This is a nice touch, bringing the rook to a slightly more active position, being able to contribute to the defense of the queenside along the 3rd rank if needed. 15...a6 [At the same time the rook lift is discouraging 15...b5? in view of 16.Ncxb5 Qxa2? 17.Ra3!+-, trapping the queen.] 16.g4 b5 17.Kb1, with very bright prospects for White. Their queenside is well protected and the g4-g5 push will be very effective.

**D)** 11...Be7 gives White all they wanted after 12.h5 h6 13.g4,



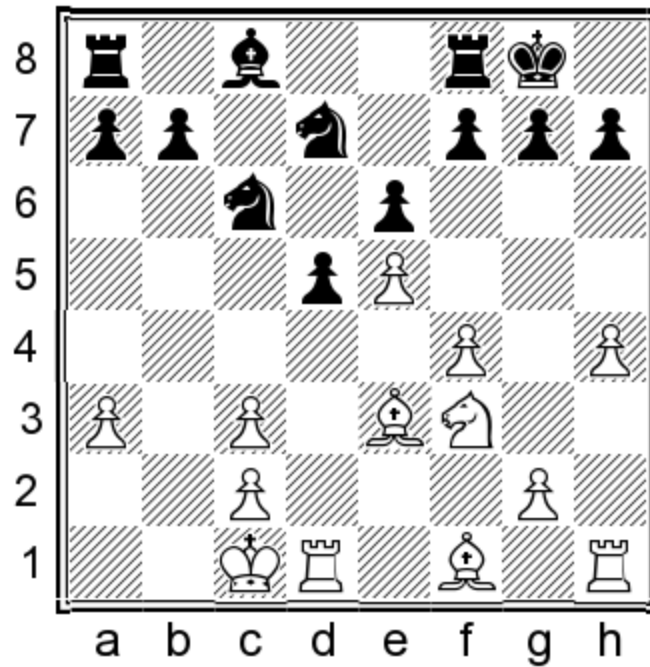
*Position after: 13.g4,*

when they did not need to waste time on a3 and their attack runs like clockwork.

**12.a3!**

Black has to commit to the ending, otherwise ...Bb4 proves to be just a loss of time.

**12...Bxc3 13.Qxc3 Qxc3 14.bxc3**



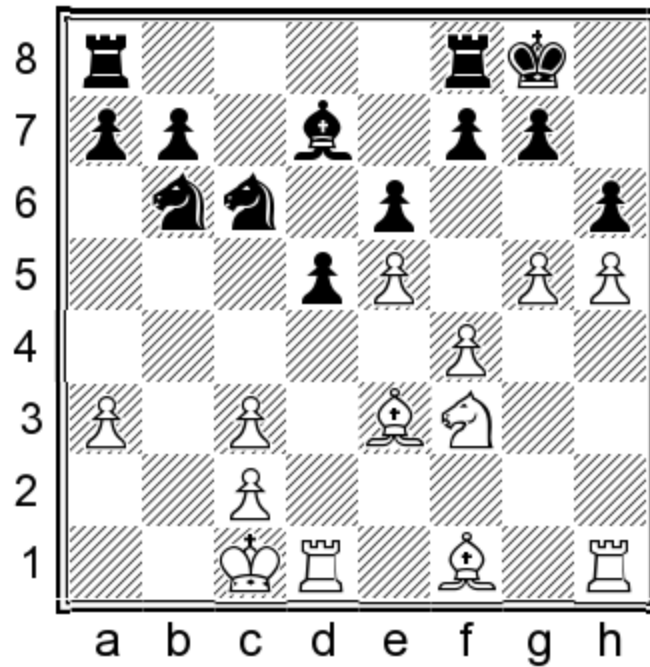
*Position after: 14.bxc3*

We could already safely conclude that White is comfortably better. While it is true their pawn structure is temporarily damaged, they can easily rectify that by playing c3-c4. At the same time their bishop pair is dominating the board and they can press Black on the kingside as well.

### **14...b6**

14...Nb6 might stop the c4-push for now, but Black will have to worry about their kingside much more. 15.h5 Bd7 [15...h6 16.g4! Bd7 17.g5,

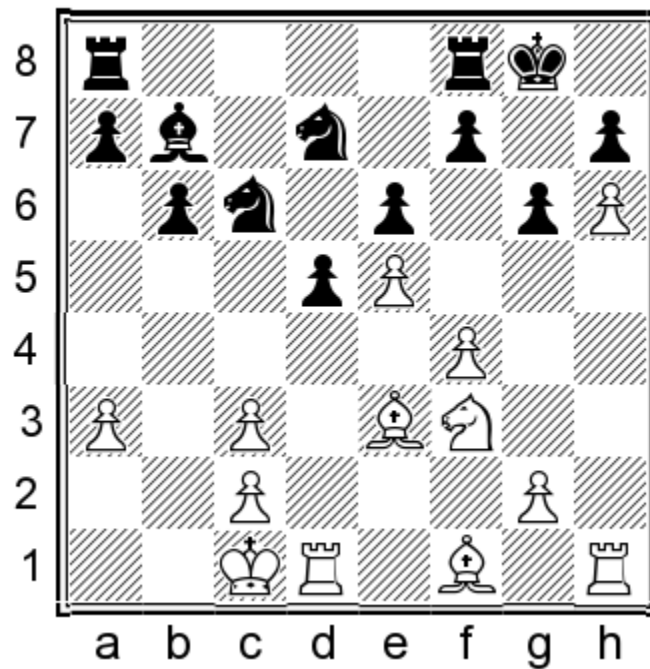




*Position after: 17.g5,*

And suddenly White has a tremendous attack, even in the endgame.] 16.h6 g6 17.Nh2±, intending Ng4-f6, gives White a very nice grip on the dark squares around the black king.

**15.h5 Bb7 16.h6 g6**



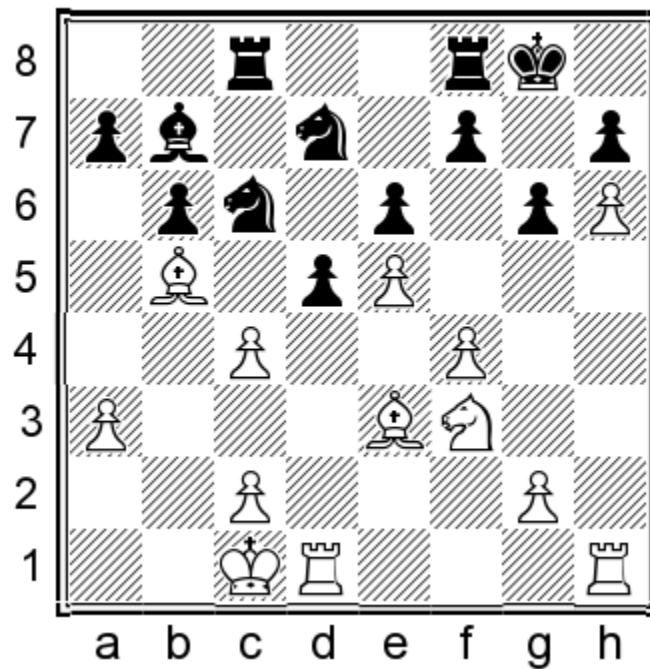
*Position after: 16...g6*

Black might have managed to keep the f6-square protected but White is now free to proceed with their plan of playing c3-c4.

### **17.Bb5!**

White can start with this preparatory move, provoking another weakening of the black queenside with ...a6. Since Black can hardly afford more weaknesses, after 17...Rac8 Everything is ready for...

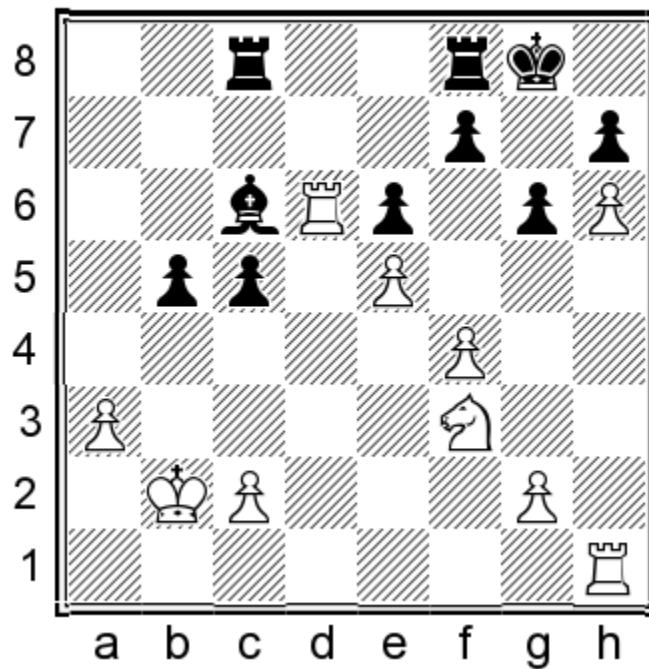
### **18.c4!**



*Position after: 18.c4!*

**18...a6 19.cxd5 axb5 20.dxc6 Bxc6 21.Rd6**

White transformed their bishop pair advantage into piece activity and Black continues to suffer in all kinds of endgames such as 21...Nc5 22.Bxc5 bxc5 23.Kb2±



*Position after: 23.Kb2±*

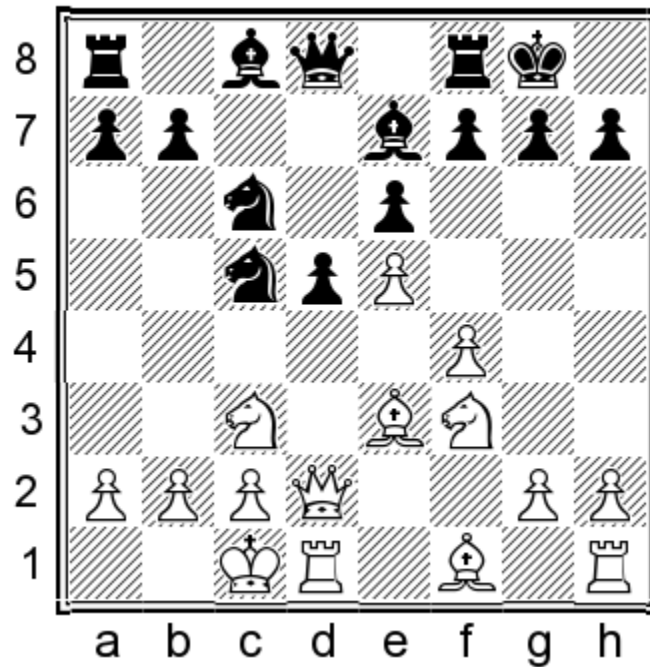
where they can hardly expect an easy life with their king isolated on g8, and the dark squares being irreparably weak.

#### **b) 9...Nxc5**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 Be7 8.Qd2 0-0 9.dxc5 Nxc5**

From the whole ...Be7 family this line is the toughest nut to crack. Both practical and analytical results suggest that Black is in trouble though.

**10.0-0-0**

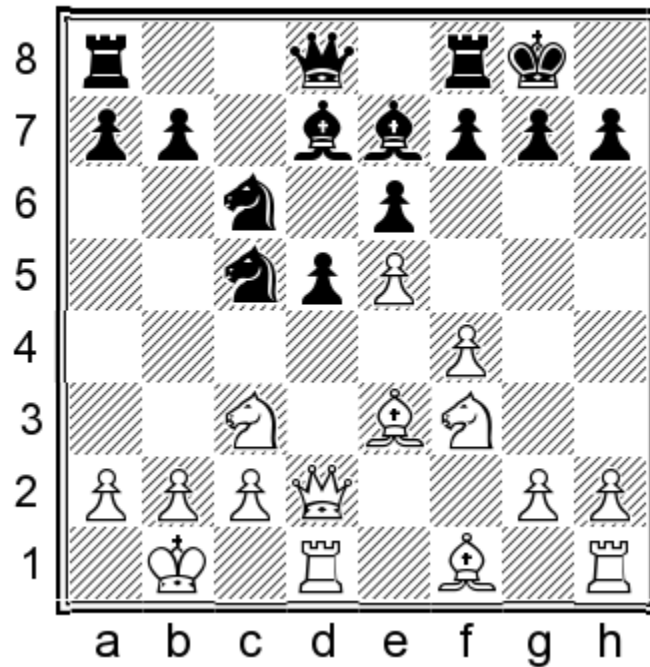


*Position after: 10.0-0-0*

### **10...a6**

The most flexible and most frequent move at the same time, all the other options have significant drawbacks.

**A)** 10...Bd7?! is the completely wrong approach to the position because White will push f4-f5 after little preparation. 11.Kb1! A useful move in any case. Now there is no reasonable defense against f5.

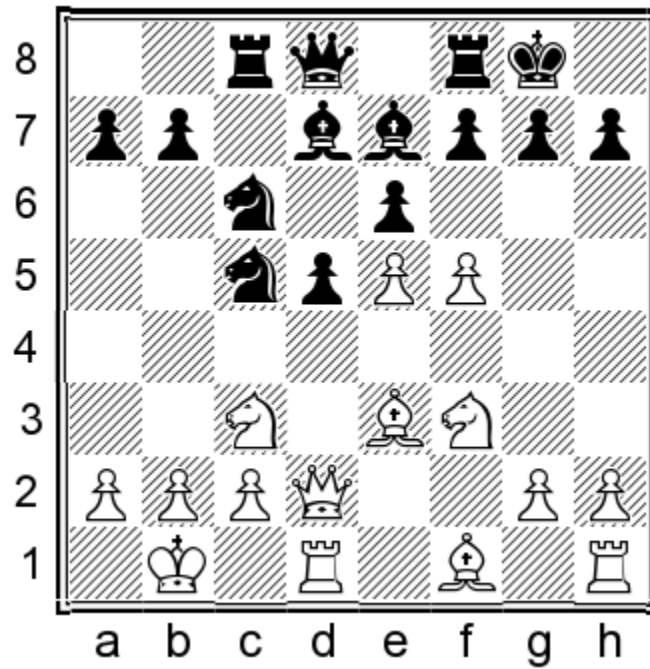


*Position after: 11.Kb1!*

**A1)** Black cannot even correct themselves with the active 11...Qa5? due to 12.Nxd5! exd5 13.Qxa5 Nxa5 14.Bxc5 Bxc5 15.Rxd5+–, winning two pawns.

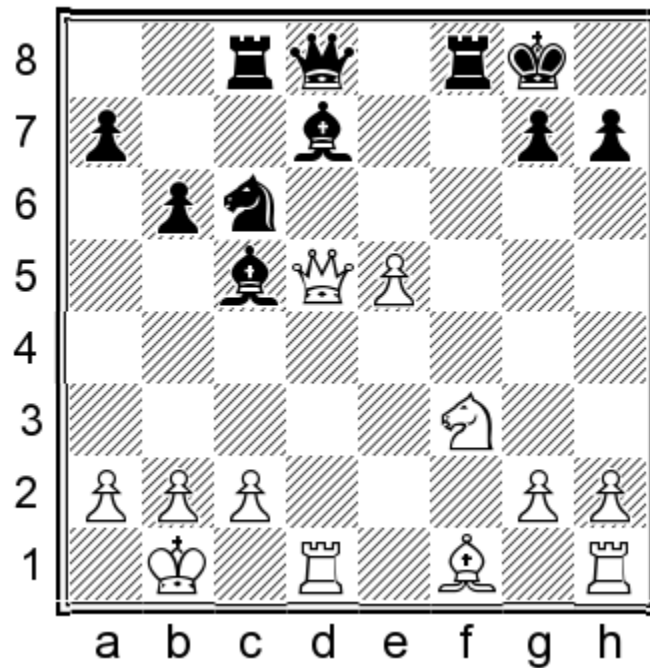
**A2)** 11...a6 12.f5! is also terrible, e.g. 12...d4 13.Nxd4 exf5 14.Nxc6 Bxc6 15.Qf2 Qa5 16.Qxf5± with both material and positional advantages for White.

**A3)** 11...Rc8 12.f5! As early as on move 12 it is already impossible to find an acceptable move for Black.



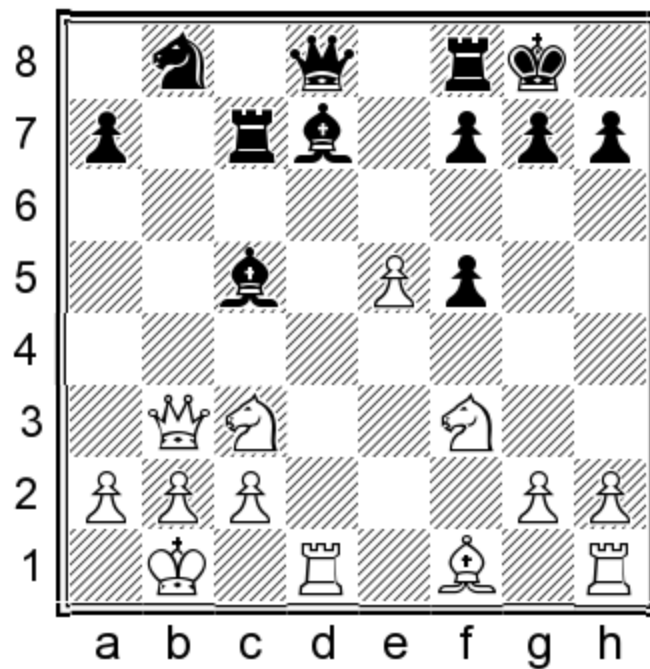
*Position after: 12.f5!*

**A3.1)** 12...b6 does not spot the nasty trick 13.fxe6 fxe6 14.Nxd5! exd5 15.Bxc5 Bxc5 16.Qxd5+.



*Position after: 16.Qxd5+*

Black has to go for 16...Rf7 17.Bc4 Be8 but after 18.Qe4 Qe7 19.h4 with the intention of Ng5 they are under tremendous, and probably decisive, pressure. Note that 19...h6 runs into 20.Ng5! anyway. 20...hxg5 21.hxg5+-  
**A3.2)** 12...exf5 13.Bxc5 Bxc5 14.Qxd5 Nb8 15.Qxb7 Rc7 16.Qb3±

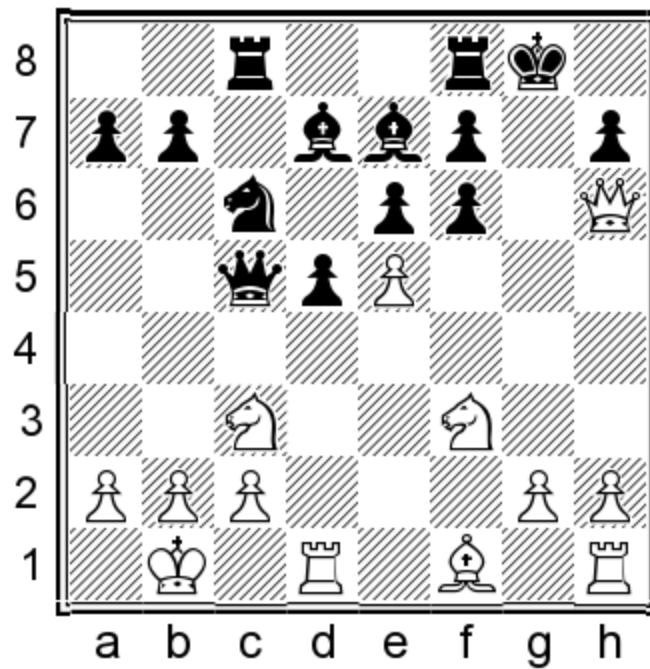


*Position after: 16.Qb3±*

The position is simply a terrible sight for Black, who is down on material and completely uncoordinated.

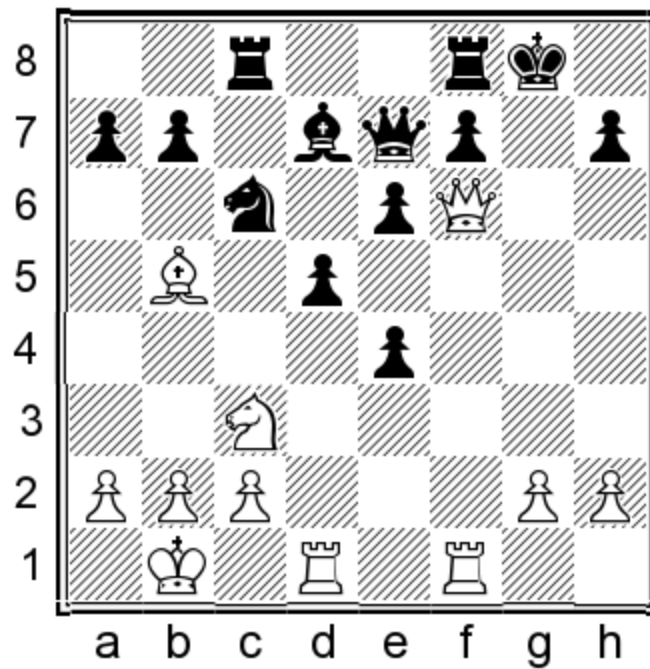
**A3.3)** 12...Qa5 13.f6! gxf6 14.Bxc5 Qxc5 15.Qh6





*Position after: 15.Qh6*

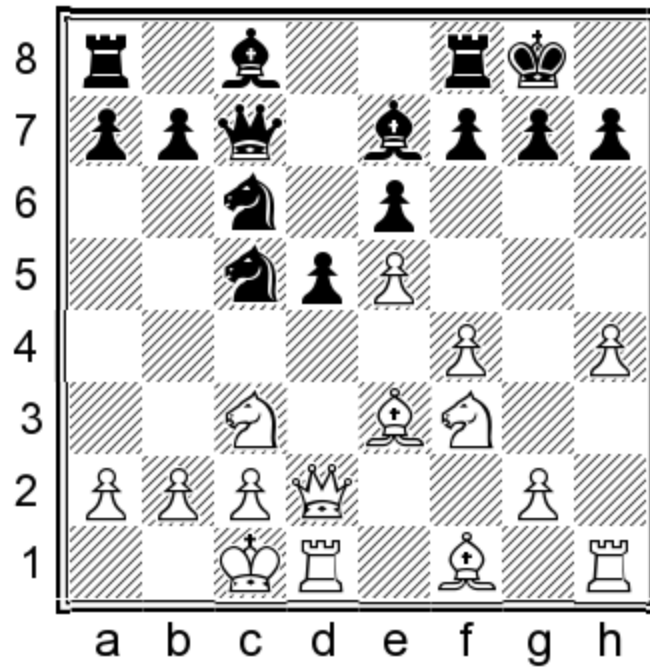
White has a strong attack and even after the best defense 15...fxe5<sup>™</sup> 16.Ng5 Bxg5 17.Qxg5+ Kh8 18.Qf6+ Kg8 19.Bb5! the attacker keeps the upper hand. 19...e4 20.Rhf1 Qe7<sup>™</sup>



*Position after: 20...Qe7™*

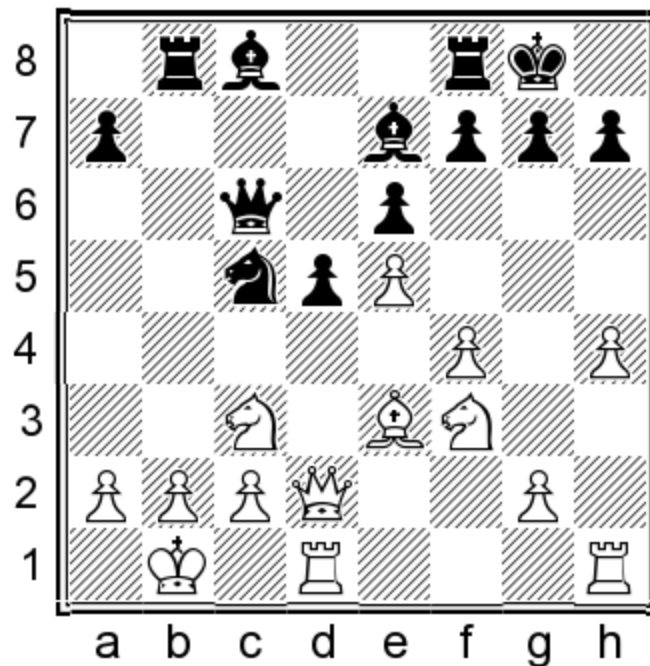
Otherwise Black just gets checkmated after Rf4-g4.  
 21.Qxe7 Nxe7 22.Bxd7 Rcd8 23.Ba4± It is true that  
 Black has some compensation for the piece but there is  
 little doubt they are worse, and are fighting for the  
 draw.

**B)** 10...Qc7 has no independent value as after 11.h4



*Position after: 11.h4*

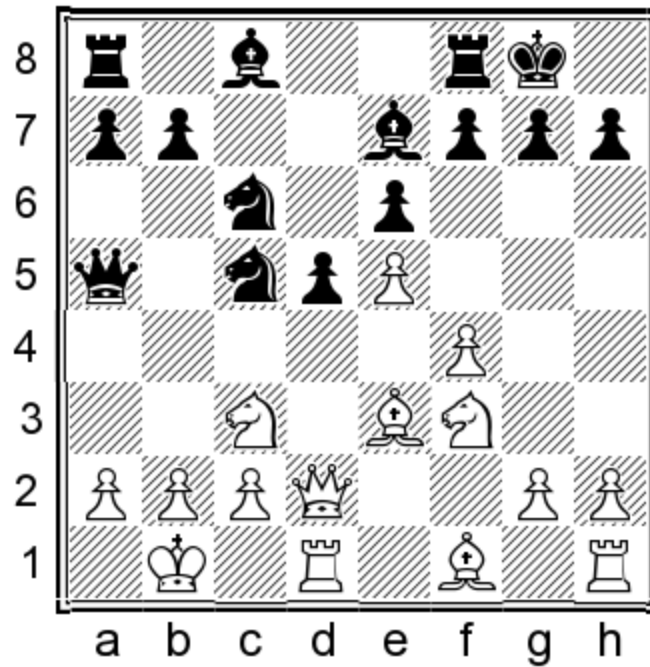
Black has little choice but to transpose to the 10...a6 11.h4 Qc7 line with 11...a6. Otherwise, 11...b5 12.Bxb5 Rb8 can certainly be analyzed, but I feel Black's pawn sacrifice can hardly be justified. The caveman approach of 13.Bxc6 Qxc6 14.Kb1



*Position after: 14.Kb1*

should work well, e.g. 14...a5 15.f5! (after all, White should be the one attacking as they have the advantage!) 15...Qb7 16.b3 exf5 17.Qxd5 Qb4 18.Qd4± Black will have to work very hard to justify the sacrifice.

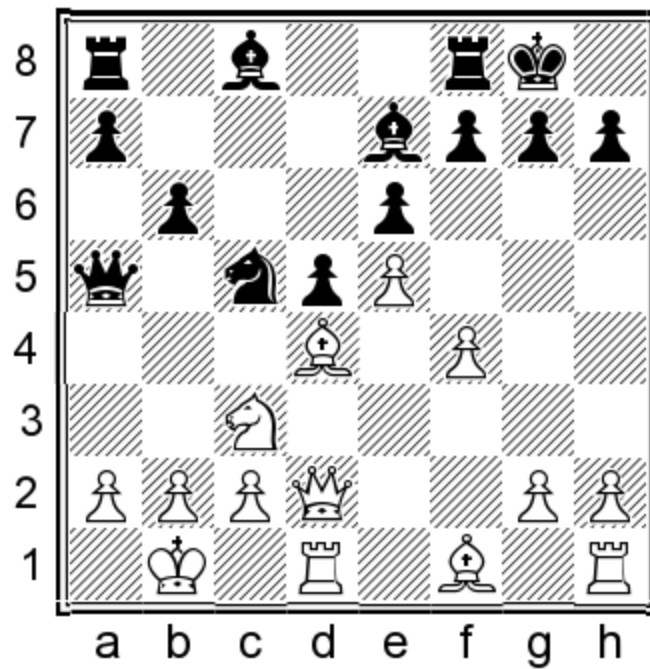
**C)** After 10...Qa5 11.Kb1! it is rather difficult to find constructive counterplay for Black. Kb1 is a useful move in any case, preparing the Nxd5 discovery which will be a very real threat after the subsequent Nf3-d4.



*Position after: 11.Kb1!*

**C1)** 11...a6 12.Nd4! forces Black to make ugly moves, e.g. 12...Kh8 [Or 12...Qc7 13.Qf2!,, simultaneously slowing down Black's counterplay with ...b5 and bringing the queen closer to the kingside.] 13.h4!, when White will simply continue pushing the h-pawn as far as possible.

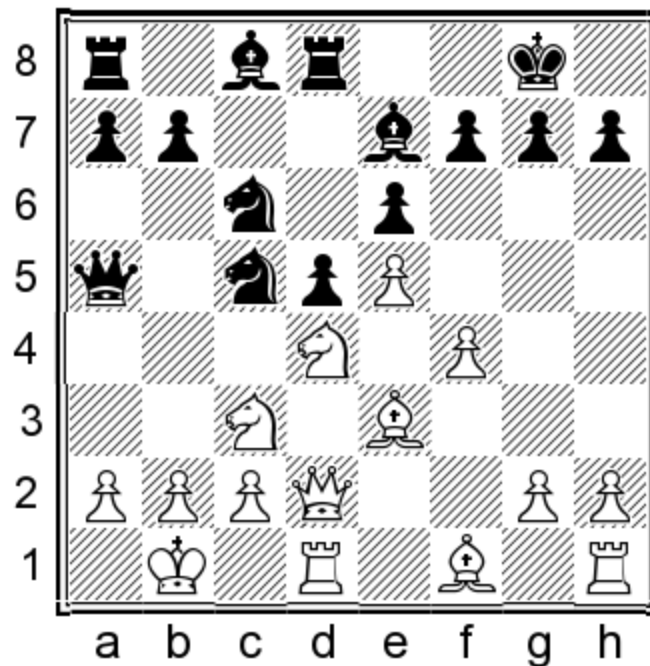
**C2)** 11...b6 looks awkward at first sight and Black is doing rather poorly indeed. Simple play gives White a nice advantage. 12.Nd4! Nxd4 13.Bxd4



*Position after: 13.Bxd4*

Note that 13...Ba6? loses to 14.Nxd5! exd5 15.Qxa5 bxa5 16.Bxc5+-.

**C3)** 11...Rd8 12.Nd4!

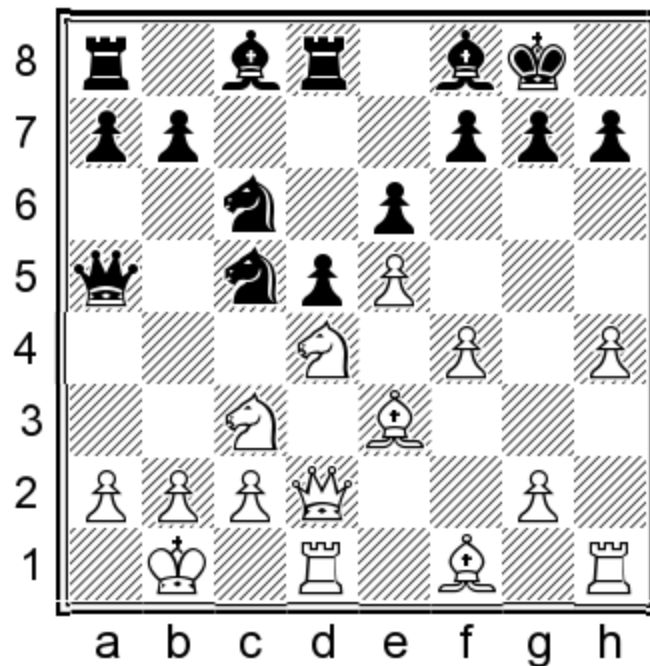


*Position after: 12.Nd4!*

Now Nxc6 followed by Nxd5 is a threat that Black needs to deal with immediately.

**C3.1)** The lines are quite similar to what we have already seen on move 11 – White just pushes the h-pawn forward. 12...Kh8 13.h4! Bd7 14.h5 Rac8 15.h6 g6 16.g4, with a powerful attack.

**C3.2)** 12...Bf8 One bishop alone can hardly successfully defend the lonely black king. 13.h4!?

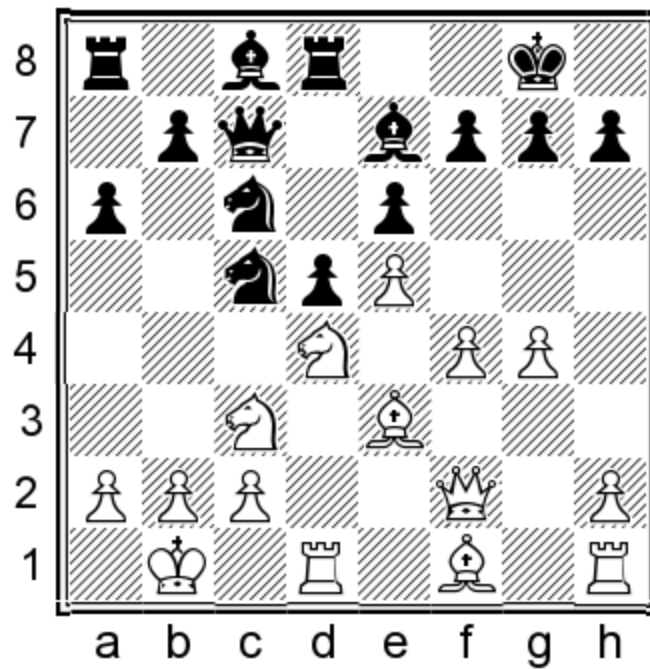


*Position after: 13.h4!?*

13...Nxd4 [13...Bd7 14.h5 Nxd4 15.Bxd4 b5 16.h6 g6 17.Nxd5! is a nice point, exploiting the fact that Black is not protecting the f6-square anymore.] 14.Bxd4 Rb8 15.h5 b5 16.h6 White's attack is faster again as after 16...b4 they can insert 17.hxg7!± before moving the c3-knight away, thus permanently damaging Black's pawn shield.

**C3.3)** 12...Qc7!? Only the queen retreat requires some serious work for White but the Qf2 maneuver does the job very well. White is creating some tension on the a7-g1 diagonal, making the c5-knight feel a bit uncomfortable. At the same time the queen is supporting the kingside expansion heavily, namely the f5-f6 push. 13.Qf2! a6 14.g4

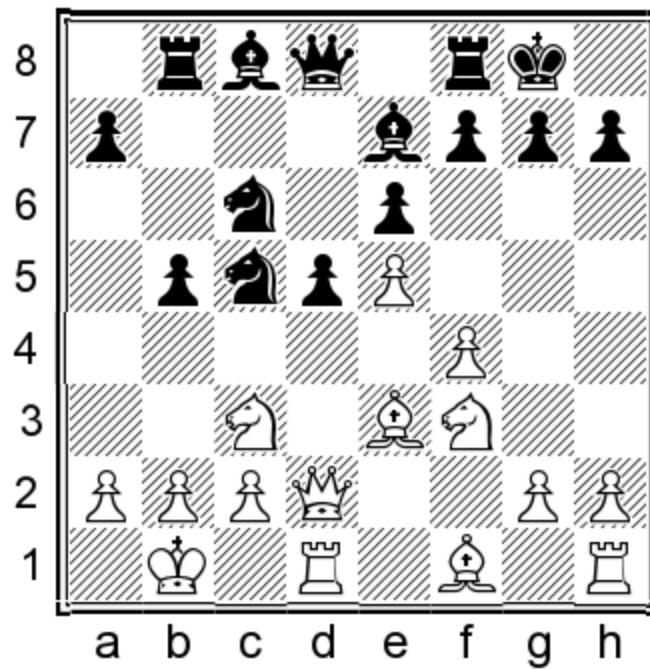




*Position after: 14.g4*

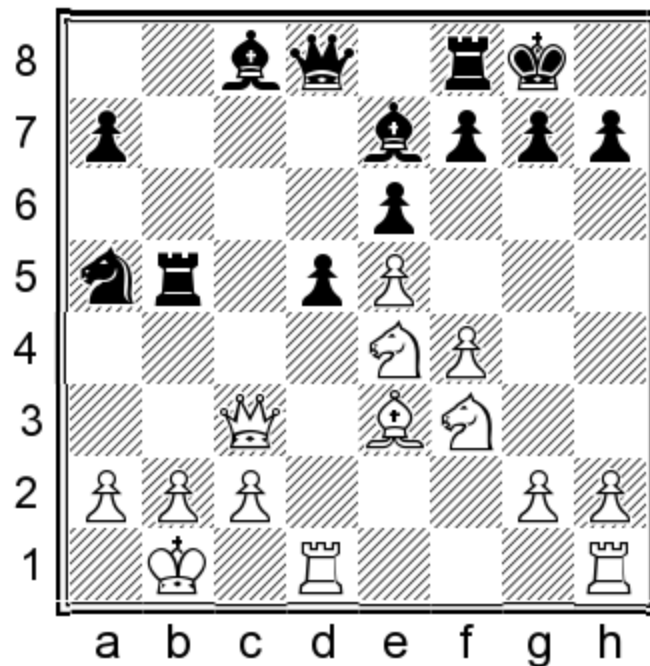
14...Nxd4 [14...b5 15.Nxc6 Qxc6 16.f5 b4 17.f6!± sees  
White arrive first once again.] 15.Bxd4 b5 16.f5 b4 17.f6,

**D)** Sadly for Black, 10...Rb8 11.Kb1 b5!?



*Position after: 11...b5!?*

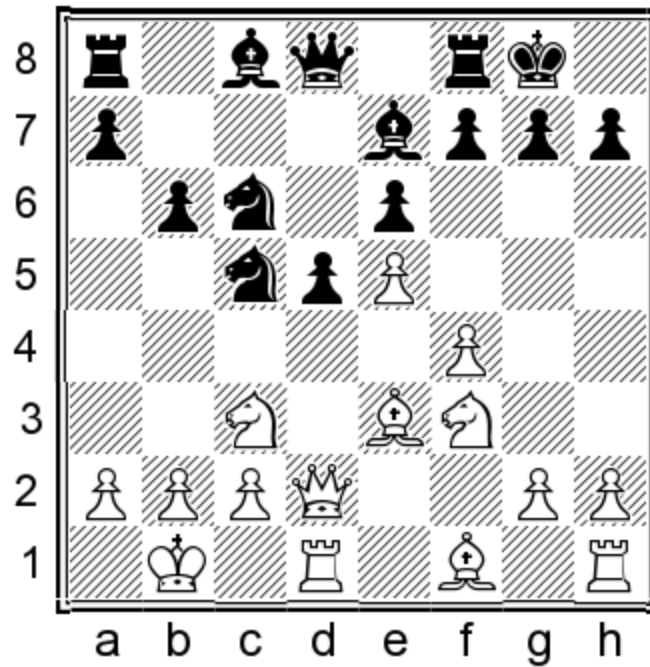
does not work well enough. Being greedy serves White very well here. 12.Bxb5! No need to fear the open b-file, White has more than enough resources to protect their monarch. 12...Ne4 13.Nxe4 Rxb5 14.Qc3 Na5



*Position after: 14...Na5*

15.Bc5! With a bit of tactics all will simplify into a clearly superior endgame. [Black's position is rather unpleasant even after the less direct 15.Bc1 Qb6 16.Nd6 Bxd6 17.exd6 Nc4 18.b3 Nxd6 19.Bb2<sup>2</sup>, swapping the material advantage for great activity along the main diagonal.] 15...Nc4 16.Qxc4 Rxc5 17.Nxc5 dxc4 18.Rxd8 Rxd8 19.Ne4 Bb7 20.Ned2± With the c4-pawn being chronically weak Black has very little to show for their material deficit.

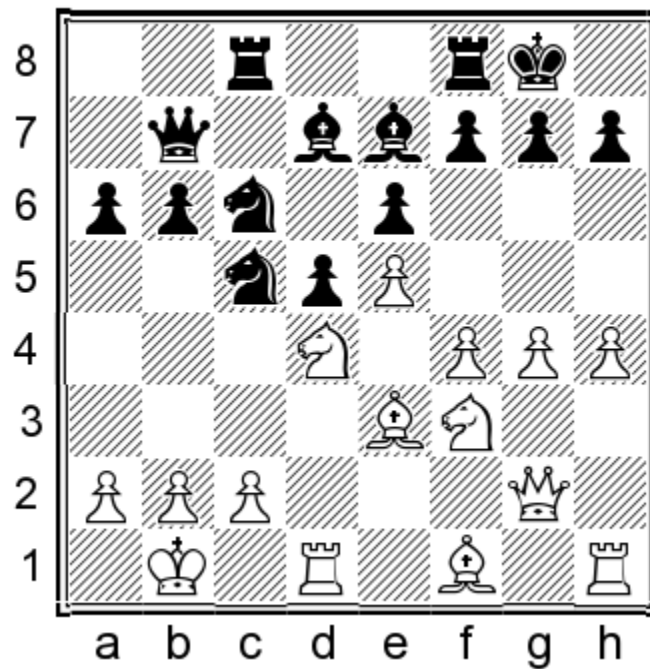
**E)** Lets now deal with the second most popular option for Black and the suggestion of renowned French Defense author Viktor Moskalenko. 10...b6 The problem with Black's set-up is that it is quite slow, and since White has a great spatial advantage, they do not mind maneuvering play at all. 11.Kb1!



*Position after: 11.Kb1!*

This little move is useful in many opposite-castling positions (if you are a fan of playing the Open Sicilian from the White side, I am sure you will agree) and here it gives White enough flexibility to either go for the direct h4 pawn storm or to play for f4-f5.

**E1)** 11...Qc7 only helps White activate the knight via 12.Nb5! , for example 12...Qb7 13.g4 Bd7 14.h4 Rac8 15.Qg2 a6 16.Nbd4±.

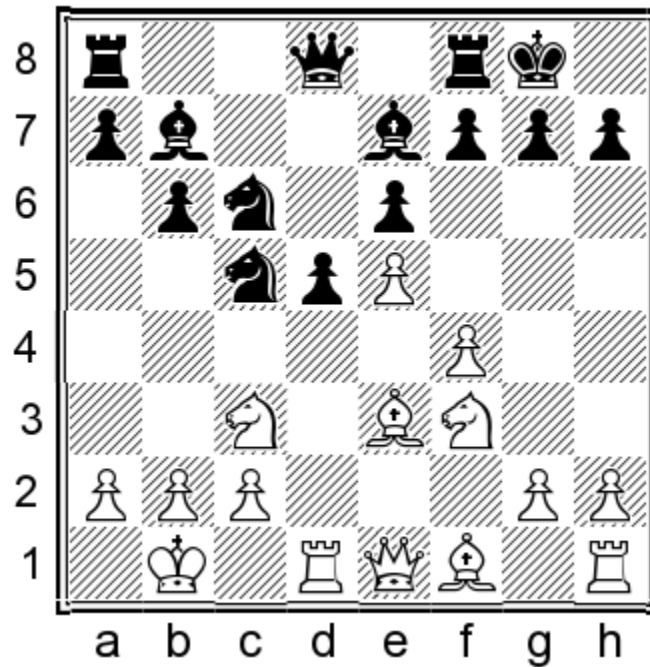


*Position after: 16.Nbd4±*

White is ready to initiate the final phase of their attack with g4-g5 and h4-h5 while Black's pawns have not even reached the 5th rank yet.

**E2)** 11...a6 12.h4 transposes into the 10...a6 line discussed below.

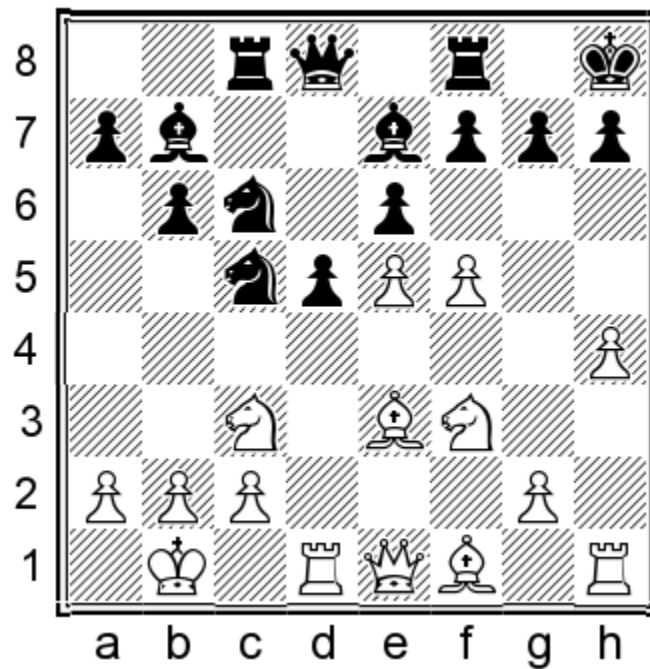
**E3)** 11...Bb7 12.Qe1!



*Position after: 12.Qe1!*

Black's rather passive way of developing will be best exploited by the f4-f5 push. 12...Rc8 [12...Qc7 is again just giving White tempi for improving their pieces.

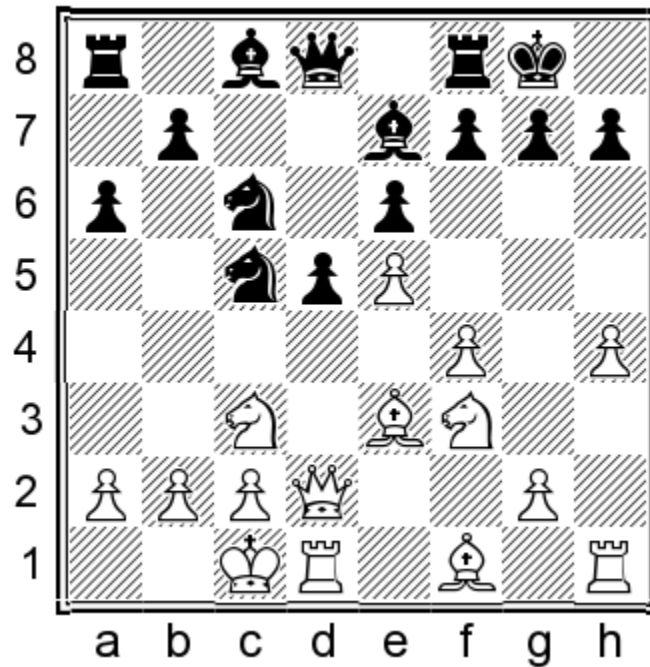
13.Nb5 Qb8 14.h4± is a joy to play for White.] 13.f5! With the d1-rook x-raying Black's queen they can hardly afford to capture on f5 and open the d-file. That means White basically has a free hand on the kingside though. 13...Kh8 14.h4



*Position after: 14.h4*

The plan is simple, push the h-pawn all the way to h6 and win a piece after ...g6, f5-f6. In the correspondence game Ivanauskas - Voveris, email 2018, Black could not hold even with the help of his computer after 14...exf5 15.Nxd5 Qe8 16.Bb5 – his position was simply too passive.

**11.h4!**



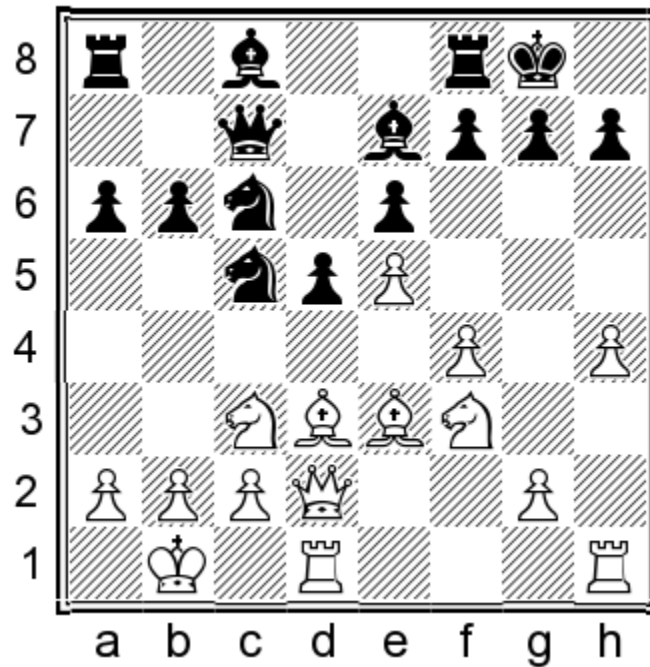
*Position after: 11.h4!*

It is preferable to start the kingside pawn advances with the h-pawn almost as a rule. Black can hardly afford to let it go all the way to h6, and therefore they will have to commit to some weakening move like ...h6 sooner rather than later. At the same time the h4-move can contribute to the typical Bd3xh7+ & Ng5 trick – see below!

## **11...b5**

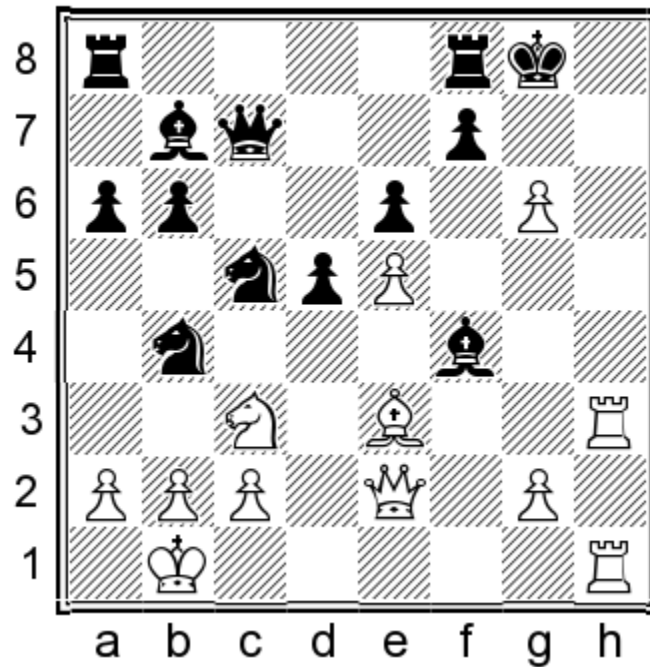
**A)** After the more restrained 11...b6 White has all the time in the world for getting a harmonious set-up with 12.Kb1! Qc7 13.Bd3





*Position after: 13.Bd3*

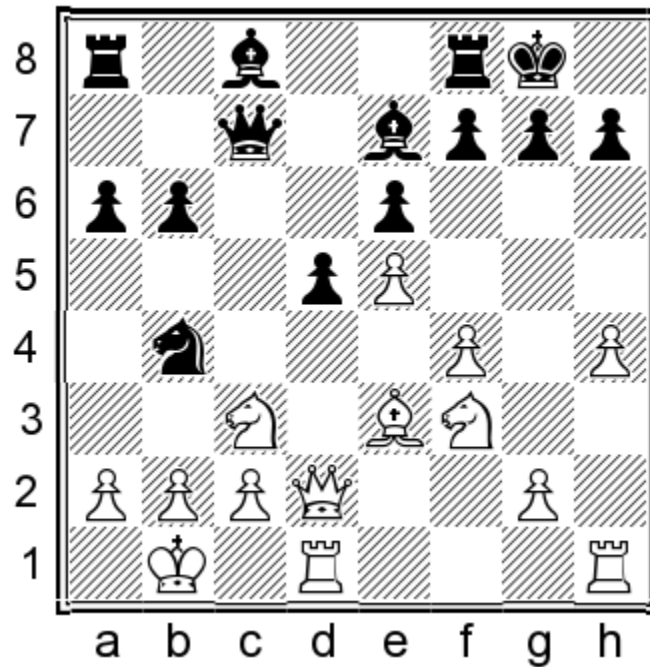
**A1)** 13...Nb4 14.Bxh7+! Kxh7 15.Ng5+ is the typical resource we already lightly touched on above. White scored a couple of brilliant victories from here. 15...Kg8 16.Qe2 g6 17.Rh3! Preparing doubling on the h-file. Surprisingly Black can do very little to stop the onslaught, for example 17...Bb7 [17...f6 also loses to 18.h5!+-] 18.h5! Bxg5 19.Rdh1 Bxf4 20.hxg6 as played in Steiger – Boychuk, email 2016.



*Position after: 20.hxg6*

White won after 20...Qxe5 21.Rh8+ Kg7 22.R8h7+ Kf6 [22...Kg8 23.Bd4! Qxd4 24.Qh5+- is a picturesque position.] 23.Rf1!+-.

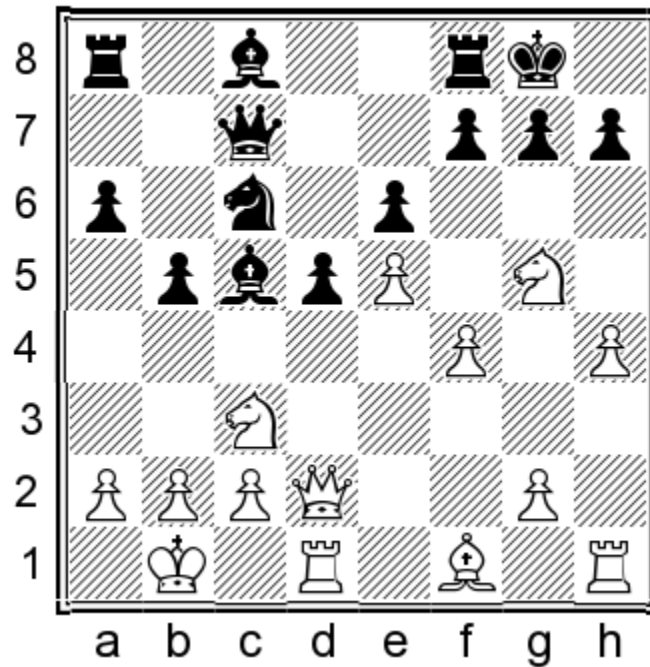
**A2)** 13...Nxd3 14.Qxd3 Ng5 is a serious positional threat now but after 14...Nb4 15.Qd2±



*Position after: 15.Qd2±*

White will just put their knight on d4 and push the h- and g-pawns even further. Black's queenside potential, once we take into account all the slow pawn moves and the fact that the b4-knight obstructs their path, seems to be rather limited to say the least.

**B)** We have already seen many times that Black should not commit their queen with 11...Qc7 too early. After 12.Kb1! Black can choose to either transpose to the previous note with 12...b6 or try their luck with 12...b5. White can now go for the exchange with 13.Bxc5! though, as after 13...Bxc5 14.Ng5



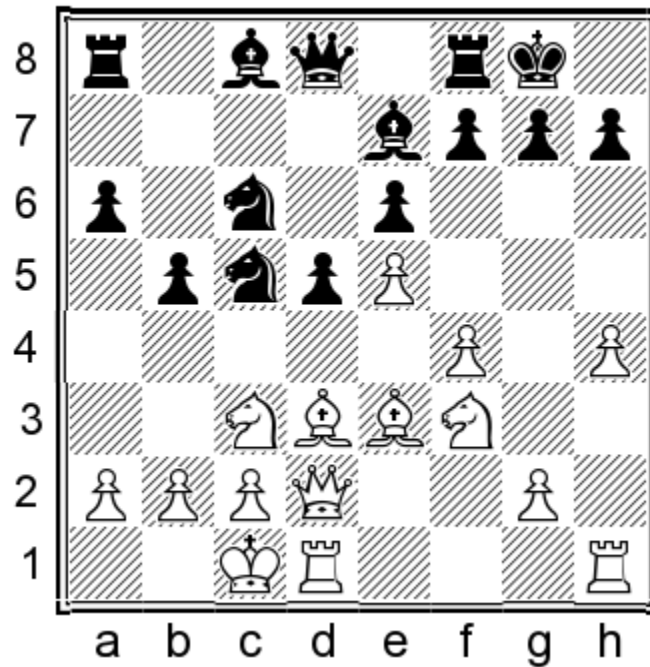
*Position after: 14.Ng5*

their attack is almost unstoppable, for example 14...Ra7 [The difference compared to the 11...a6 12.Bxc5 line is that after 14...f6 15.exf6 gxf6 White now has the strike 16.Nxd5!, which gives them a crushing attack after 16...exd5 17.Qxd5+ Kg7 18.Qxc5 fxg5 19.hxg5+-.] 15.Bd3 h6 16.g4,, intending Nh7, g4-g5, and Nf6+.

## 12.Bd3!

White is already threatening to capture on h7 and c5. It is true that the dream scenario would be to keep their light-squared bishop as well, but the white queen should do a good substitute job.

It would be nice to recommend 12.Bxc5 Bxc5 13.Ng5? with the intention of storming the light squares after Bd3 but White's attack comes to halt after 13...f6! 14.exf6 gxf6.



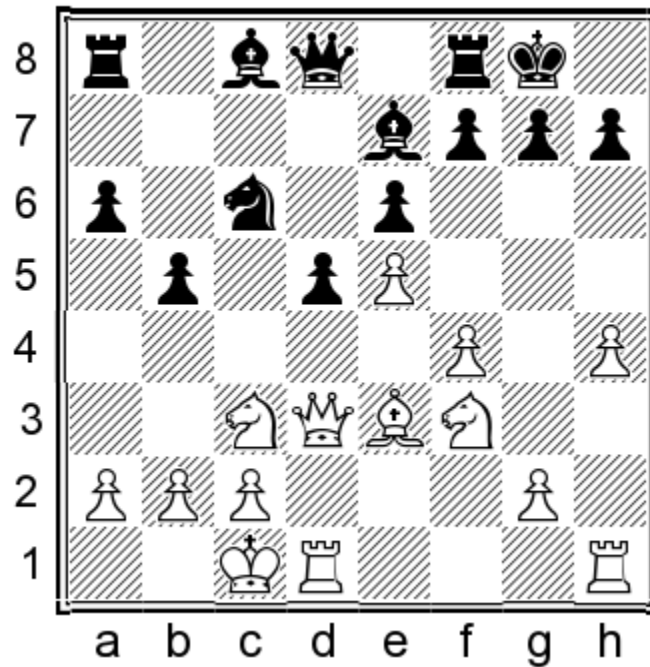
*Position after: 12.Bd3!*

### 12...Nxd3+

**A)** As we noted earlier, 12...Bd7? fails to spot the threat. 13.Bxc5 Bxc5 14.Bxh7+! Kxh7 15.Ng5+ Kg8 16.Qd3 g6 17.h5, with a crushing attack for White.

**B)** 12...Nb4 13.Bxh7+ Kxh7 14.Ng5+ Kg8 15.Qe2+- **C)** And even 12...b4 13.Bxc5 Bxc5 14.Bxh7+ Kxh7 15.Ng5+ Kg8 16.Qd3+-, and Black loses in a very similar fashion, so the text move is basically a necessity.

### 13.Qxd3



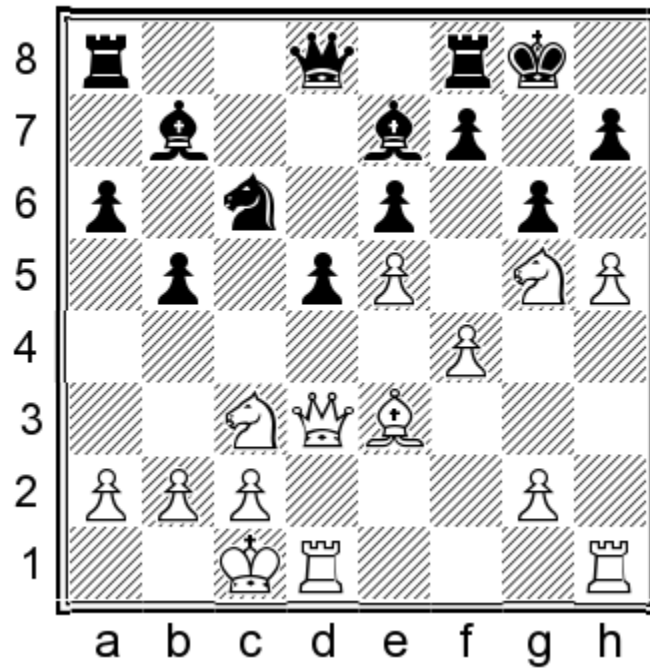
*Position after: 13.Qxd3*

### **13...Nb4**

Black's knight will stand in the way of their queenside expansion but there was little choice again, this time in view of the move Ng5.

**A)** 13...b4 Here White will move the attacked knight only after the Zwischenzug 14.Ng5! g6 15.Na4±, with a clear advantage. Black's kingside is terribly weakened and their queenside counterattack is not going anywhere.

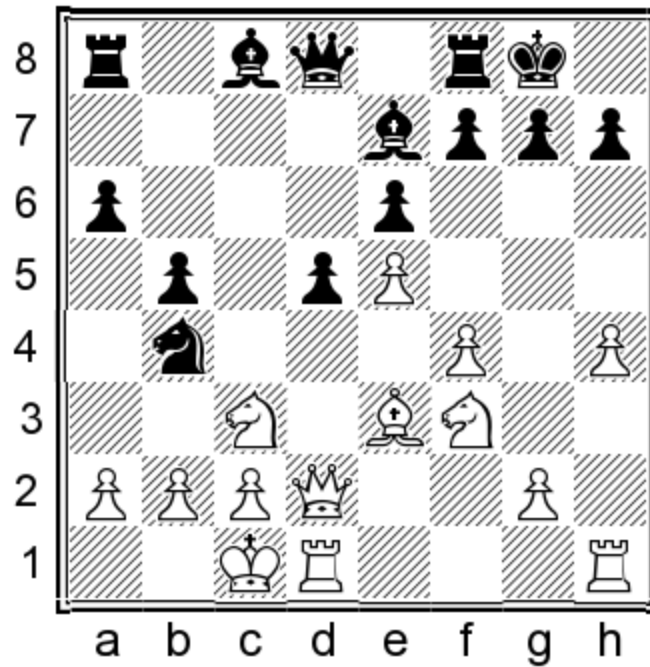
**B)** 13...Bb7 14.Ng5! g6 15.h5 is very dangerous for Black as well.



*Position after: 15.h5*

White does need to sacrifice a pawn here, but the tremendous compensation they get after 15...Bxg5 16.fxg5 Nxe5 17.Qe2 Nd7 18.Rh4!±, intending Rdh1, is beyond any doubt.

**14.Qd2**



*Position after: 14.Qd2*

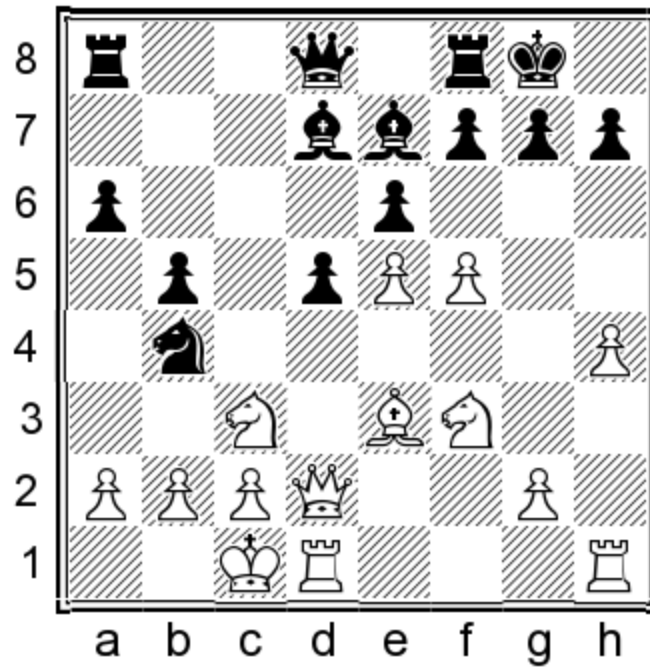
While Black might have stopped the threat of Ng5 for the time being, it turns out the f4-f5 push becomes very venomous since Black's knight is not protecting their center anymore.

### **14...Bb7**

**A)** Note that 14...Nc6 will most likely transpose to the 13...Bb7 note after 15.Ng5 Bb7 16.Qd3.

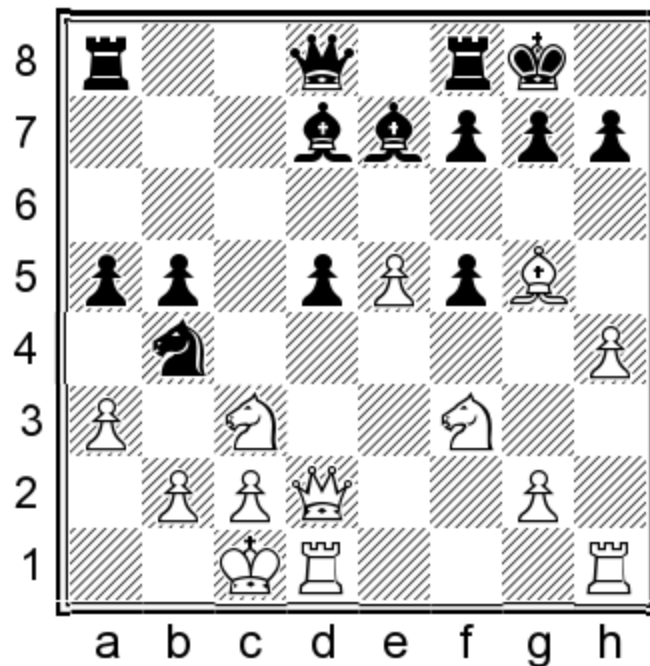
**B)** 14...Bd7 is, in a way, very similar to the text move although the bishop's presence on d7 makes things easier in some aspects. We start the attack with 15.f5!





*Position after: 15.f5!*

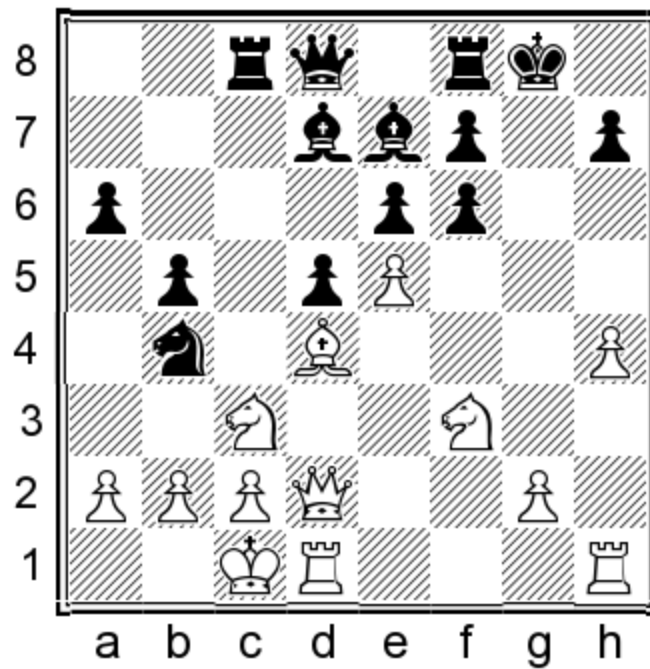
**B1)** 15...exf5 16.a3 leaves Black with a broken position if they choose to retreat the knight – White will switch to positional play with Qxd5, gaining a significant edge. Similarly, the creative 16...a5 should be handled in a calm fashion with 17.Bg5!±.



*Position after: 17.Bg5!±*

Black's counterattack is not going anywhere and White intends to turn axb4 into a real threat with Qd2-f4, making some room for their king, while Black's position becomes even more unstable.

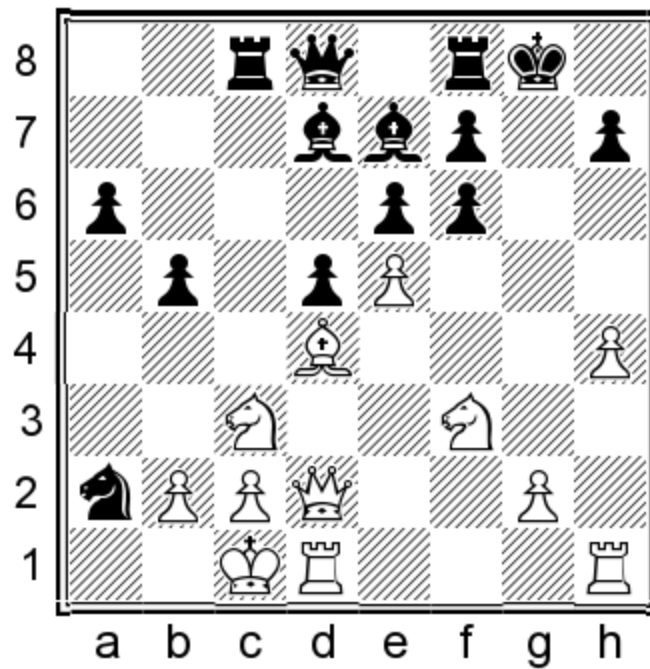
**B2)** 15...Rc8 16.f6! gxf6 17.Bd4! This is the key move. Both here and in the text position – where ...Bb7 was played instead – White is making way for the move Qh6. Black can only choose between losing a lot of material, or getting checkmated.



*Position after: 17.Bd4!*

**B2.1)** 17...f5 18.Qh6 f6 will see White blast through the g-file after 19.Rdg1!+-, intending g2-g4.

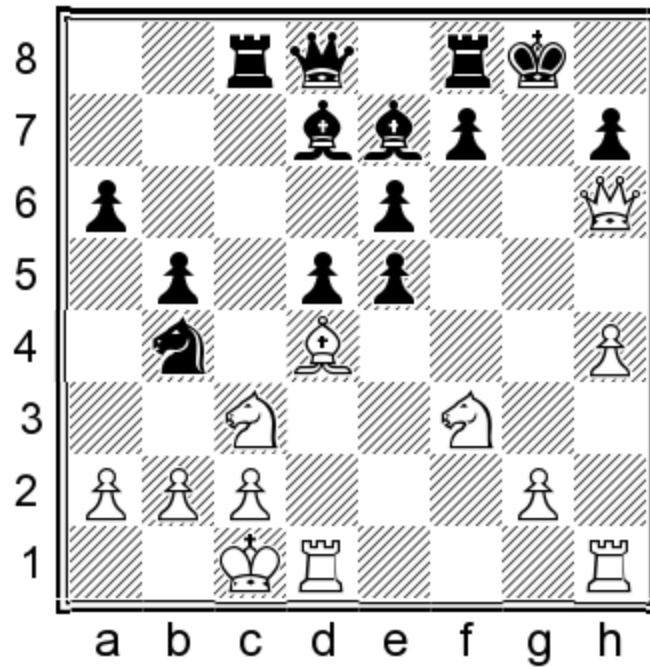
**B2.2)** 17...Nxa2+



*Position after: 17...Nxa2+*

This requires no special treatment in comparison with the main line since 18.Nxa2 [18.Kb1? is in fact quite a serious mistake as after 18...Nxc3+ 19.bxc3 b4! things are not so clear at all due to the b-file being opened.] 18...fxe5 19.Nxe5 f6 20.Nxd7!+-, gaining an important tempo for consolidating White's position, shows why the bishop is not so well placed on d7.

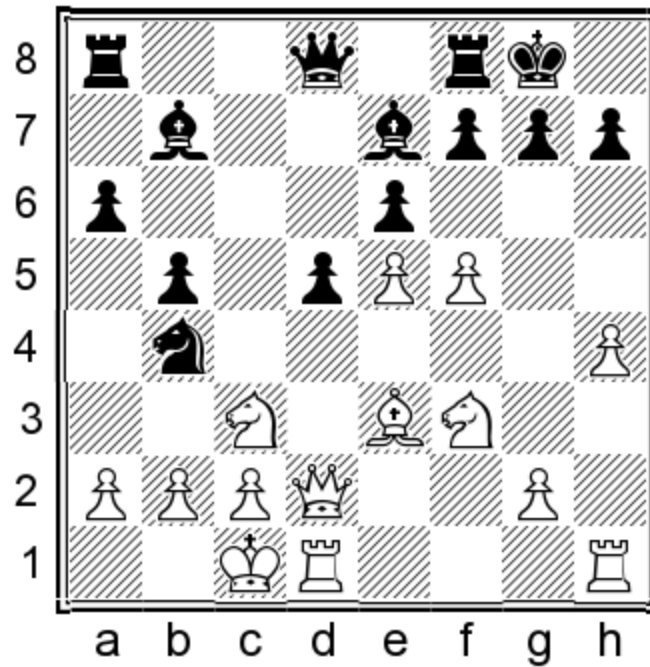
**B2.3)** 17...fxe5 18.Qh6



*Position after: 18.Qh6*

18...Nxa2+ [18...exd4 19.Ng5 Bxg5+ 20.hxg5 Re8 21.g6!+- is one of the beautiful strikes we will see in the main line as well.] 19.Kb1!+- There is a little difference here compared to the main line as Black's light-squared bishop's placement is not important anymore due to White's more advanced attack.

**15.f5!**



*Position after: 15.f5!*

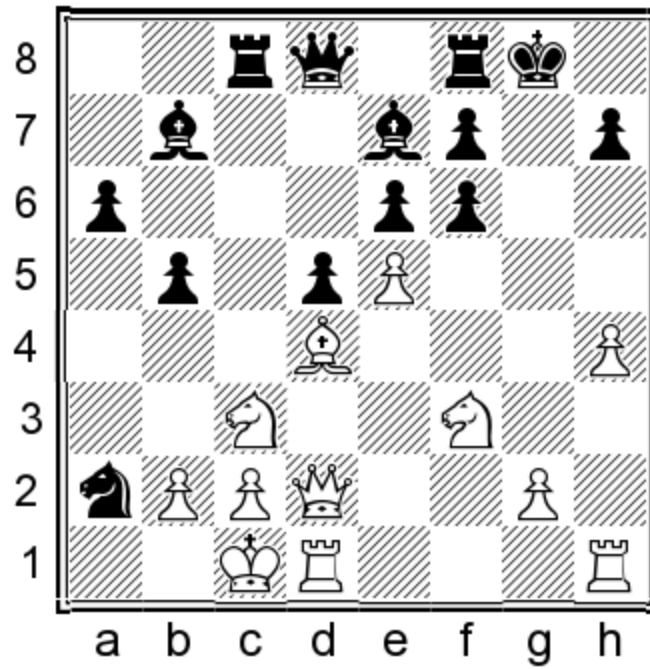
And again!

**15...Rc8**

15...exf5 16.a3 is again horrible if Black lets the attacker take the d5-pawn (this time with a knight). Attempting to muddy the waters is even less satisfactory: 16...a5 17.Nxb5! Of course White will not accept the Greek gift on b4. 17...Qd7 18.Nd6 Bxd6 19.exd6+- 16.f6!

This typical breakthrough is winning once again. Pay attention to the subtle difference between this line and the 14...Bd7 note though!

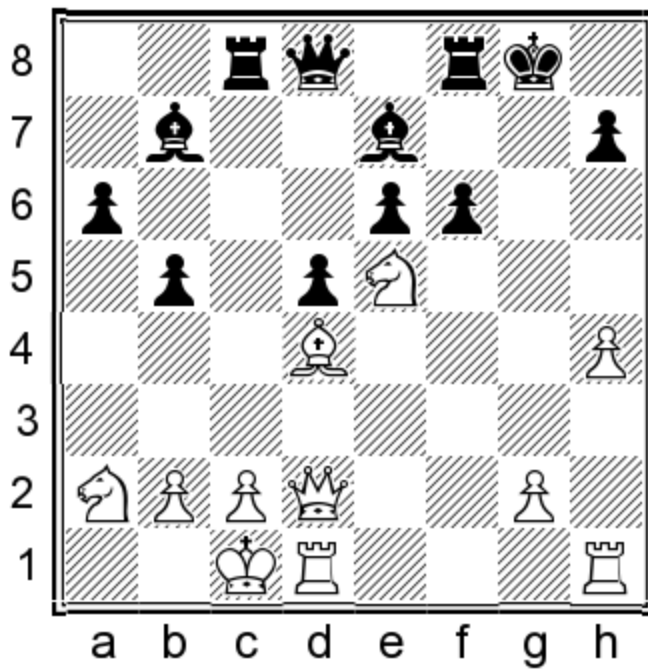
**16...gxf6 17.Bd4! Nxa2+**



*Position after: 17...Nxa2+*

**18.Kb1!!**

The key difference is that after 18.Nxa2? fxe5 19.Nxe5 Black's bishop is not hanging anymore and after 19...f6,

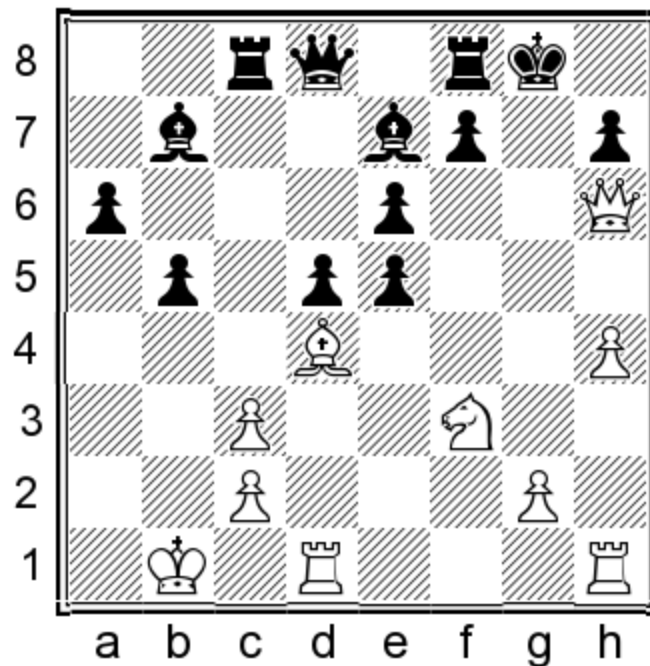


*Position after: 19...f6*

followed by ...e5, Black is gaining at least some counterplay. When White has such brilliant attacking prospects there is no need to allow this.

**18...fxe5 19.Qh6! Nxc3+ 20.bxc3**





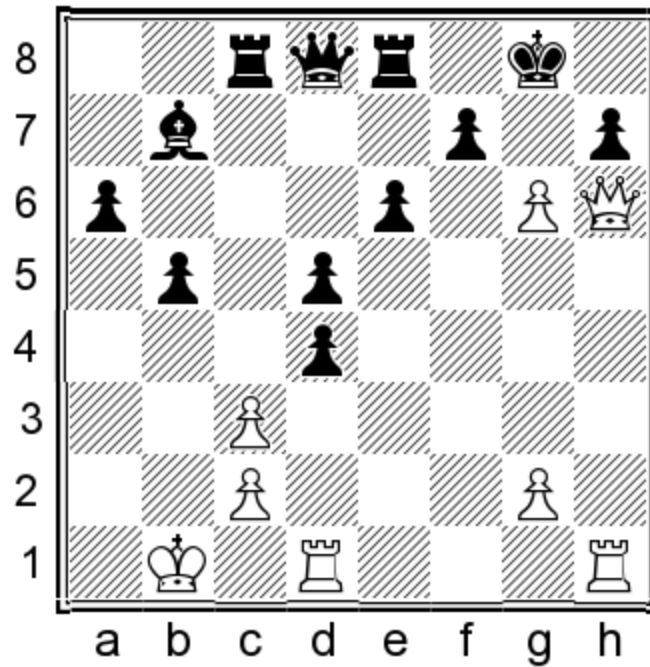
*Position after: 20.bxc3*

Black cannot stop the killing threat of Ng5 or the Rh3-g3 lift.

### **20...f6**

**A)** 20...f5 loses due to the simple Qxe6+ of course, but in case you were wondering what happens in the ...Bd7 variation, know that 21.Rh3 f4 22.Nxe5+- is completely busted for the second player, whether ...Bd7 or ...Bb7 was played.

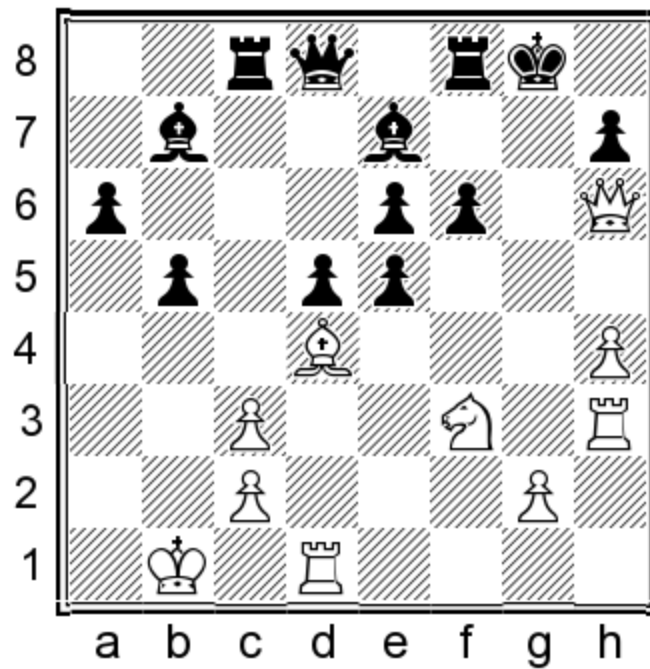
**B)** Remember the sweet touch 20...exd4 21.Ng5 Bxg5 22.hxg5 Re8 23.g6!



*Position after: 23.g6!*

Black cannot afford to open the f-file due to a mate in three, and protecting the seventh rank with 23...Rc7 does not help either due to 24.g7+-.

**21.Rh3!**



*Position after: 21.Rh3!*

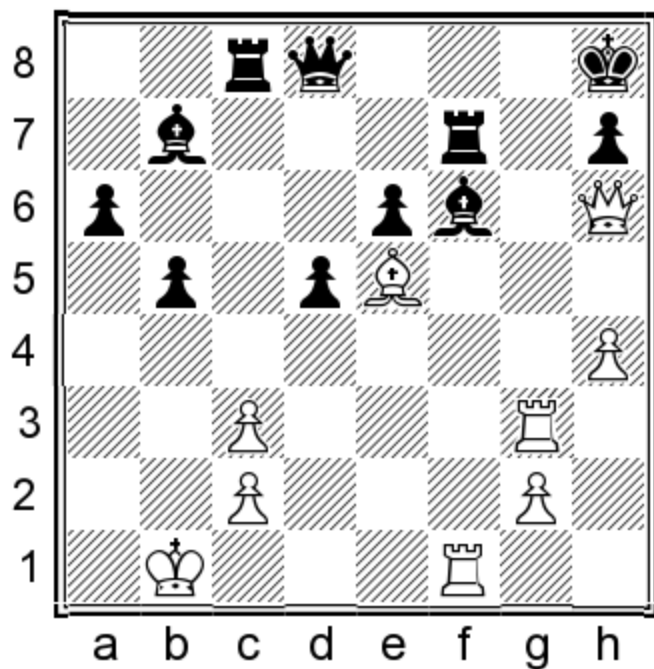
**21...Rf7**

The black monarch is not going anywhere after 21...Kf7 22.Nxe5+!, for example 22...fxe5 23.Qh5+ Kg8 24.Rg3+ Kh8 25.Bxe5+ Bf6 26.Rf1+–, threatening, among other moves, Qg5.

**22.Rg3+ Kh8 23.Nxe5!**

There shall be no relief until Black's king is checkmated.

**23...fxe5 24.Bxe5+ Bf6 25.Rf1+-**

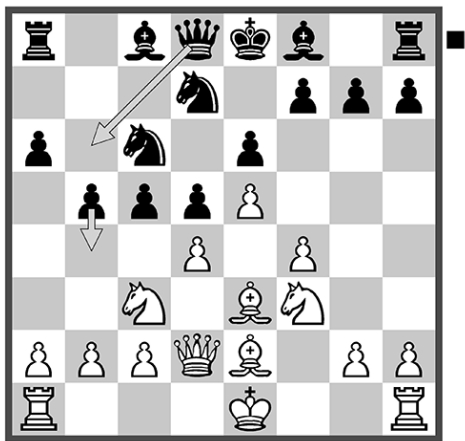


*Position after: 25.Rf1+- It's mate in five at most.*

# Chapter 13

## Quick ...a6 & ...b5

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 a6 8.Qd2 b5 9.Be2**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 13 - Quick ...a6 & ...b5

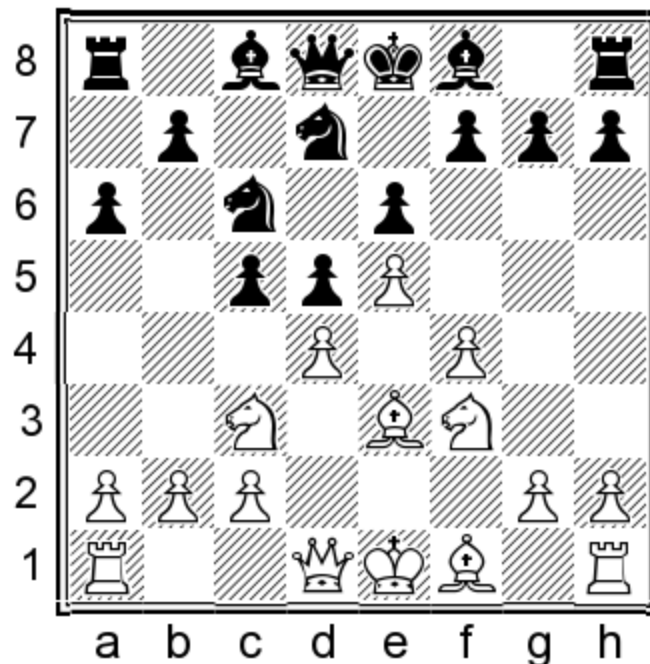
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 a6 8.Qd2 b5 9.Be2

a) 9...b4

b) 9...Qb6

**a) 9...b4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 a6**



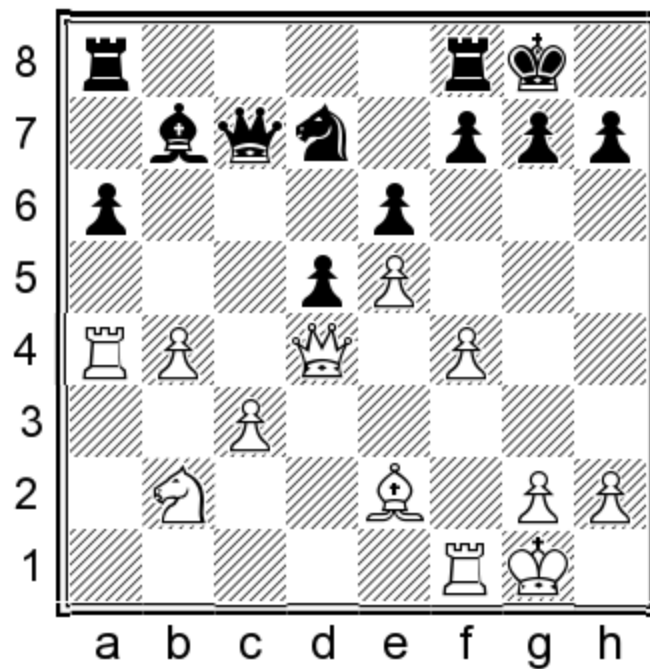
*Position after: 7...a6*

Black's aim here is to start their queenside play as soon as possible. Since castling long is not logical for White

anymore, we will employ the Nd1 set-up, followed by castling short.

## 8.Qd2

I was tempted to suggest 8.a3, but in the recent game Ragger – Vitiugov, Prague 2020, Black most likely showed the correct way to equalize. 8...Qb6 9.Be2 cxd4 10.Nxd4 Bc5 11.Na4 Qa5+ 12.c3 Bxd4 13.Bxd4 Nxd4 14.Qxd4 Qc7 15.b4 0-0 16.0-0 b5 17.Nb2 Bb7 18.a4 bxa4 19.Rxa4

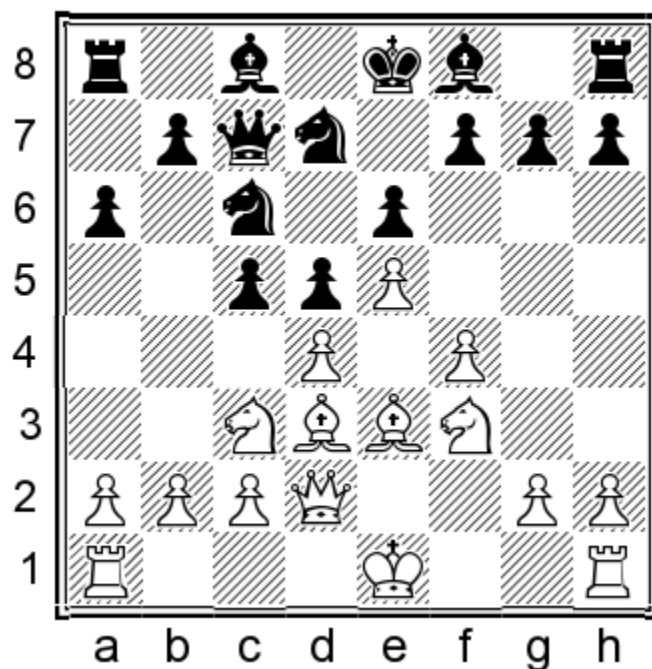


*Position after: 19.Rxa4*

Here Nikita must have slipped with 19...Rfc8 but I suspect that the position after 19...a5 20.b5 Nc5 21.Ra3 a4 22.Nxa4 Nxa4 23.Rxa4 Rxa4 24.Qxa4 Qxc3 was his true intention. It is not easy to play for either side but objectively it seems to be roughly balanced.

## 8...b5

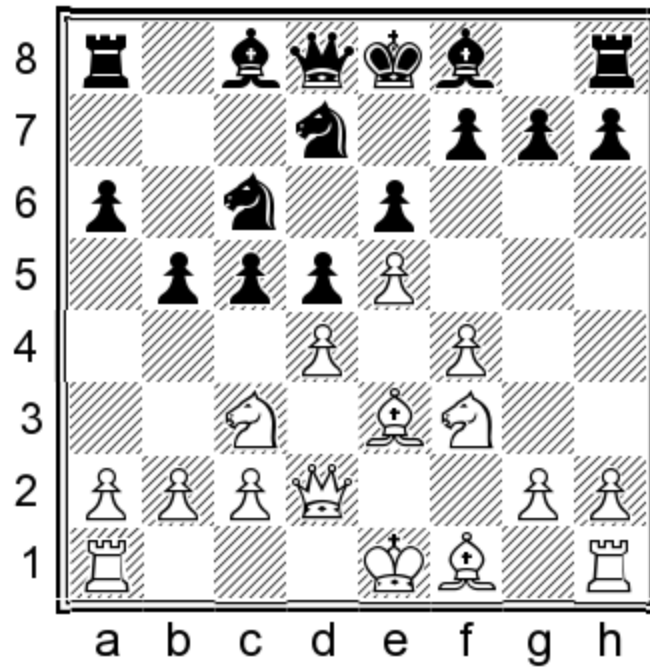
8...Qc7!? is a half-waiting move, intending not to lose time on ...Be7 and luring White into castling long – in which case ...b7-b5 would be quite effective. We should not accept the invitation and make a non-committal move ourselves. 9.Bd3



*Position after: 9.Bd3*

It will turn out that the c7-queen is far from being ideally placed and 9...b5 10.Qf2! b4 11.Na4 c4 12.Be2<sup>2</sup> should be compared with the 9.Bd3 note to the main line. Here Black's pawns are not going anywhere and White can comfortably focus on pushing the f-pawn forward.



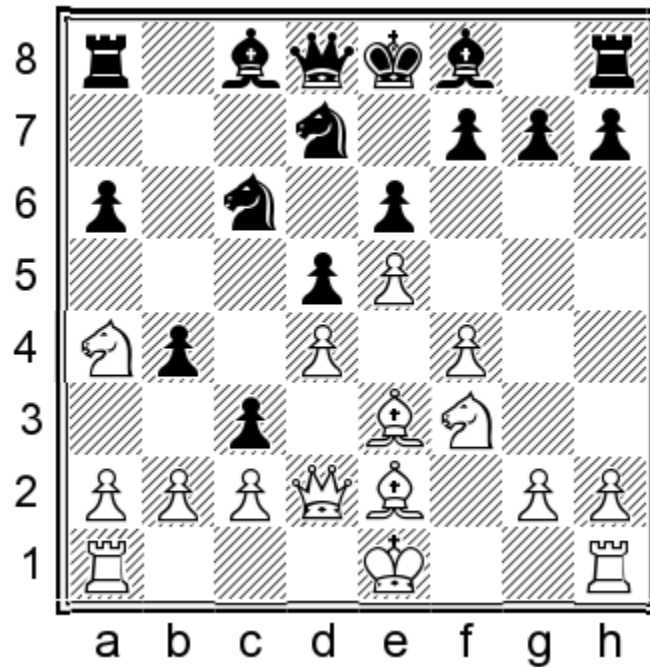


*Position after: 8...b5*

## 9.Be2

Our goal is the Be2, Nd1, and c2-c3 set-up, as we saw in the ...Be7 chapter. Nevertheless, since Black has not yet committed to playing ...Be7, there is a whole host of extra options we need to investigate.

9.Bd3 is not working as well as it did in the 8...Qc7 variation anymore due to 9...b4 10.Na4 c4 11.Be2 c3!



*Position after: 11...c3!*

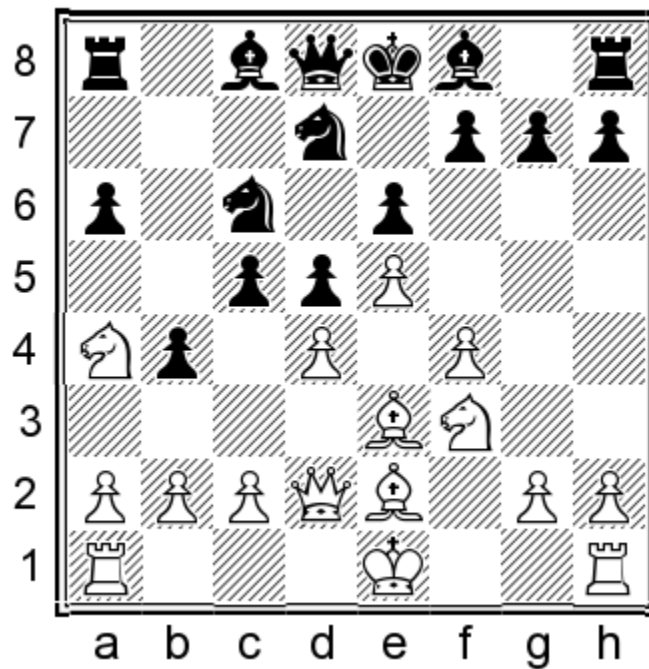
White's queen is not so comfortable on d2, and it allows Black to gain time whilst damaging White's structure.

As always we should be careful about timing the Nd1-retreat well. The payoff can be great especially if Black pushes ...b4 before the knight retreats.

### **9...b4**

9...Be7 10.0-0 is a direct transposition into the ...Be7 chapter.

### **10.Na4!**



*Position after: 10.Na4!*

This move causes Black to lose control over their dark squares.

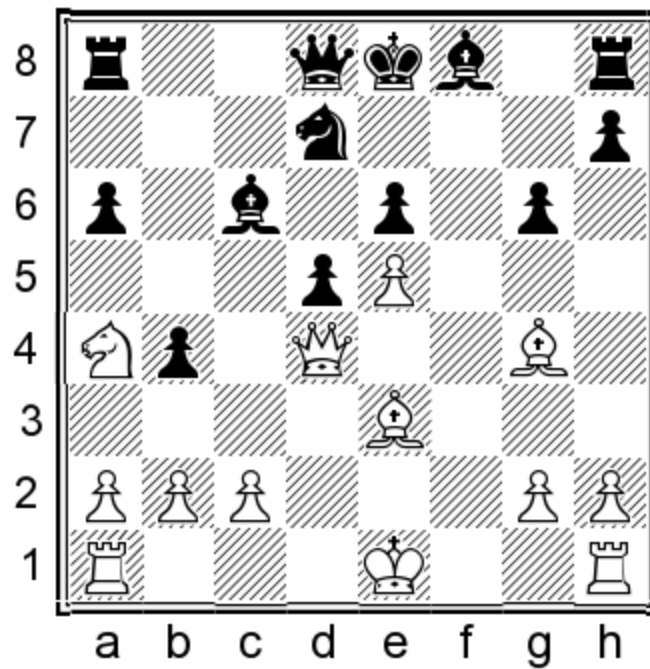
**10...cxd4**

10...c4 11.c3 Qa5 12.Bd1!± looks a bit strange at first sight, but it turns out White's knight is well protected and they will soon push f4-f5, with a nice advantage.

**11.Nxd4 Nxd4 12.Qxd4 Bb7!**

Threatening ...Bc6. Only this gives Black decent chances, otherwise they are just much worse as their counterplay on the queenside would simply grind to a halt.

**13.f5 Bc6 14.fxe6 fxe6 15.Bh5+ g6 16.Bg4!**

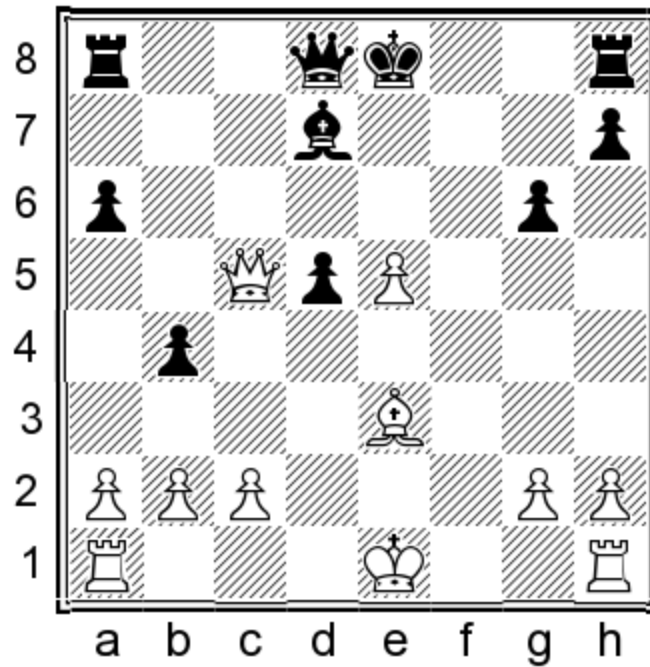


*Position after: 16.Bg4!*

Black needs to tread extremely carefully here. While it is true they might hold with a lot of inhuman precision, it is extremely difficult to defend their position in practical play.

### **16...Bg7**

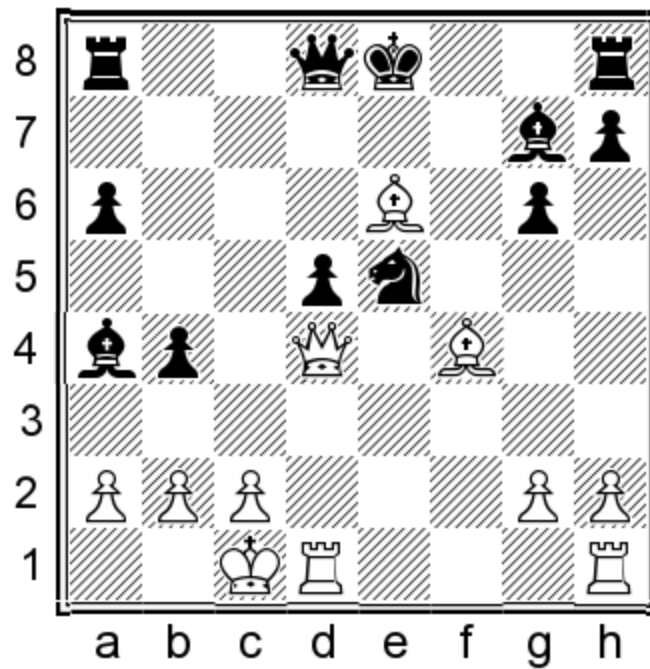
For example, 16...Bxa4?! leads to an immediate collapse of Black's defenses as after 17.Bxe6 their best bet is to give some material back with 17...Bc5 18.Bxd7+ Bxd7 19.Qxc5 and hope for the best in the pawn-down opposite-colored bishop position that ensues.



*Position after: 19.Qxc5*

19...Qh4+ 20.g3 Qe4 21.Rf1 Rc8 22.Qd4 Rc4 23.Qxe4 Rxe4  
24.Kd2± While this might not be outright lost, Black is fighting for their life.

**17.Bxe6 Nxe5 18.0-0-0 Bxa4 19.Bf4!**

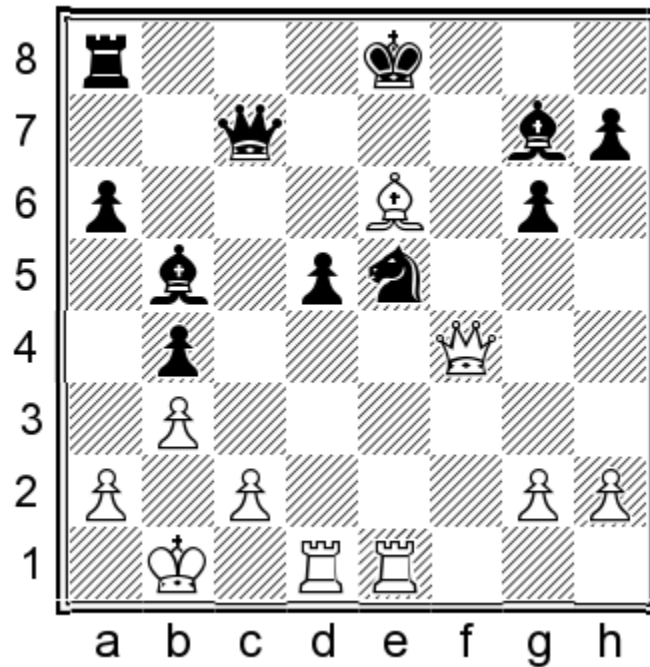


*Position after: 19.Bf4!*

This seems to be the critical position of the whole 9...b4 line. White is a full piece down but there is little doubt they will regain it soon. On the other hand the fate of Black's king, which is currently stuck in the center, remains very unclear.

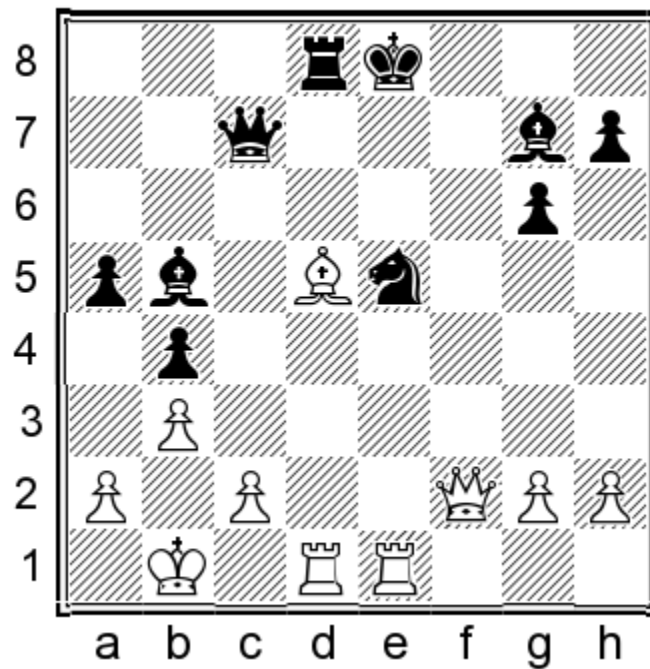
### **19...Rf8**

19...Qc7 20.b3 Bb5 21.Kb1! (...Nd3+ was a threat) 21...Rf8  
22.Rhe1 Rxf4 23.Qxf4



*Position after: 23.Qxf4*

hardly solves Black's problems. White has already reclaimed part of their sacrificed material and Black's king is still stuck on e8. 23...Rd8! [Simplifying into an endgame with 23...Bc6 24.Bxd5 0-0-0 25.Be6+ Bd7 26.Bxd7+ Nxd7 27.Qxc7+ Kxc7 28.Re7± brings Black little relief as White's active rooks and two extra pawns put them on the verge of winning.] 24.Bxd5 a5 25.Qh4 Kf8! 26.Qf2+ Ke8

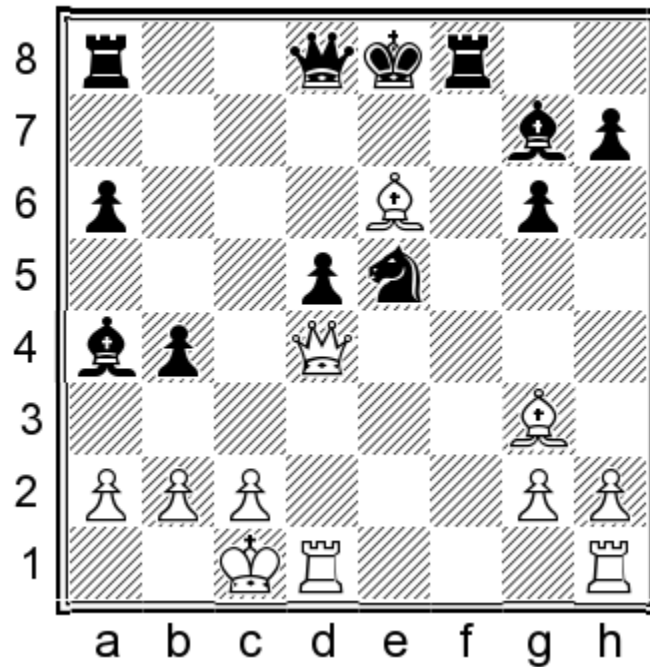


*Position after: 26...Ke8*

Black seems to be holding, though their position is balancing on a knife edge. Obviously White is the one still seriously pushing, and one of the nice ideas to destabilize the defender's position could be 27.a4!? with the idea of 27...bxa3 28.c4 Bc6 29.Qc5f, where White's attack continues.

**20.Bg3**

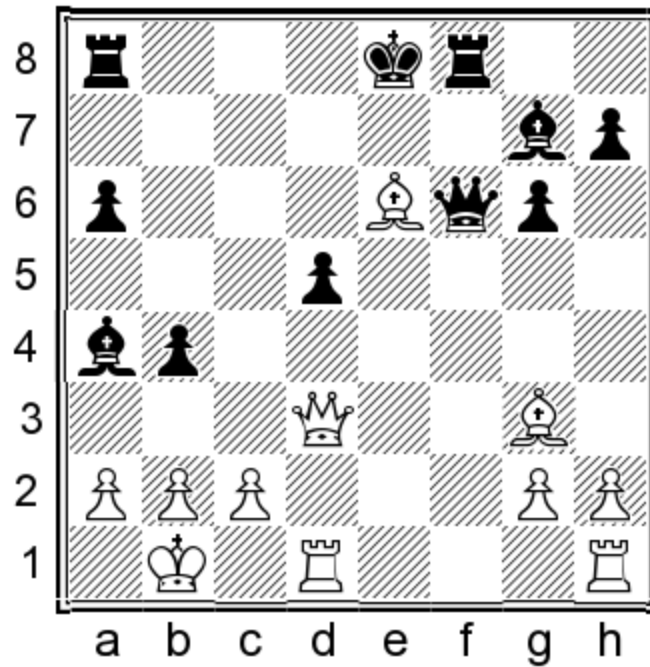




*Position after: 20.Bg3*

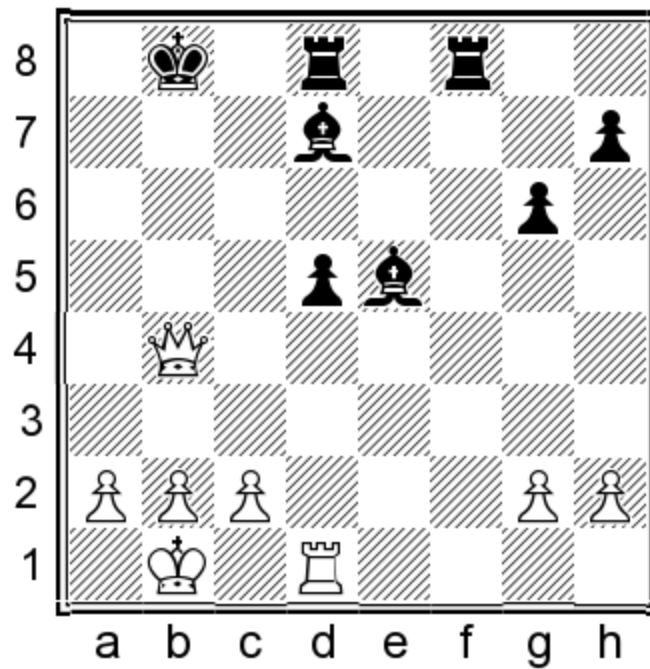
## 20...Qf6

**A)** The position is extremely rich in tactics so it is definitely worth your time to study it in greater detail. The bottom line remains the same though - White's position is always slightly more pleasant. 20...Nd3+!? 21.Qxd3 Qg5+ 22.Kb1 Qf6



*Position after: 22...Qf6*

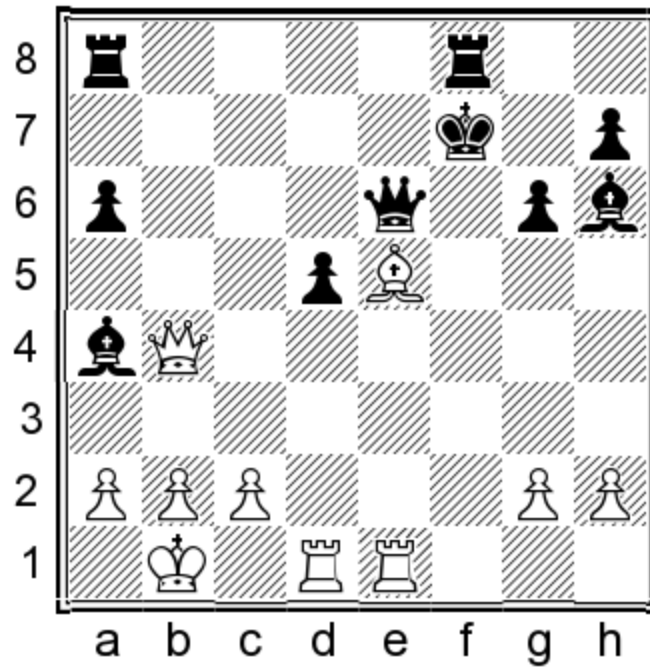
would be a nice way out for Black were it not for  
 23.Bd7+!! Bxd7 24.Be5, winning Black's queen. After  
 24...Qxe5 25.Rhe1 0-0-0 26.Rxe5 Bxe5 27.Qxa6+ Kc7  
 28.Qa5+ Kb8 29.Qxb4+



*Position after: 29.Qxb4+*

White has a whole army of extra pawns and defending the black king should prove no easy task after, say 29...Kc8 30.Qc5+ Bc7 31.b4<sup>2</sup>.

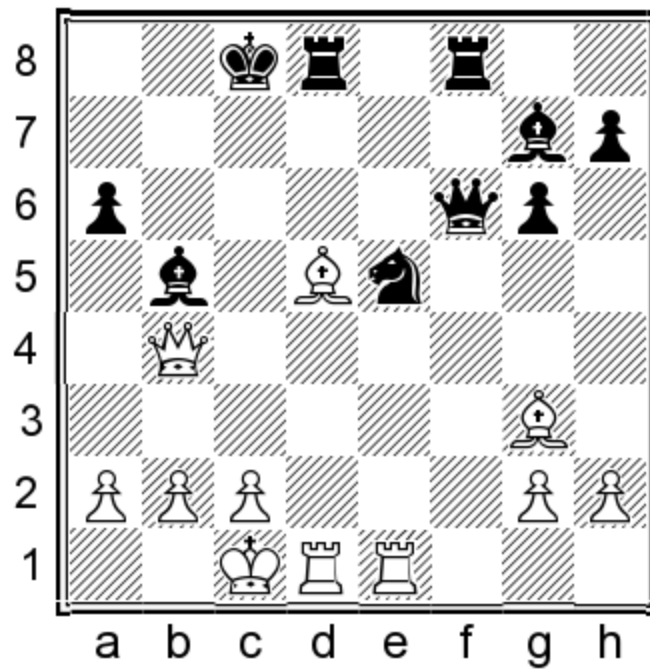
**B)** 20...Qe7 21.Rhe1 Qxe6 22.Bxe5 Bh6+ 23.Kb1 Kf7 24.Qxb4



*Position after: 24.Qxb4*

is very dangerous for Black too. Their king will hardly find peace on the kingside due to the serious weakening of the long diagonal and because of their hanging pieces and the e1-e6 x-ray, Black's best chance is 24...Bxc2+ 25.Kxc2<sup>2</sup>, which is, of course, rather unappealing for Black.

**21.Bxd5 0-0-0 22.Qxb4 Bb5 23.Rhe1**

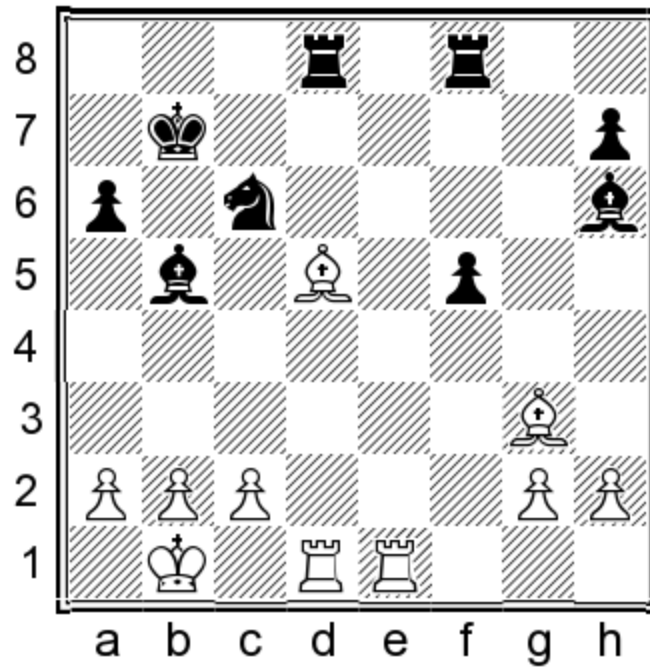


*Position after: 23.Rhe1*

Analyzing all the complex variations and all their details would take at least another full volume. That would, sadly, be a little impractical, but if you familiarize yourself with the book's analysis, you should definitely be able to understand all the nuances much better than your opponent. Dynamics always play into White's hand here.

### **23...Rfe8**

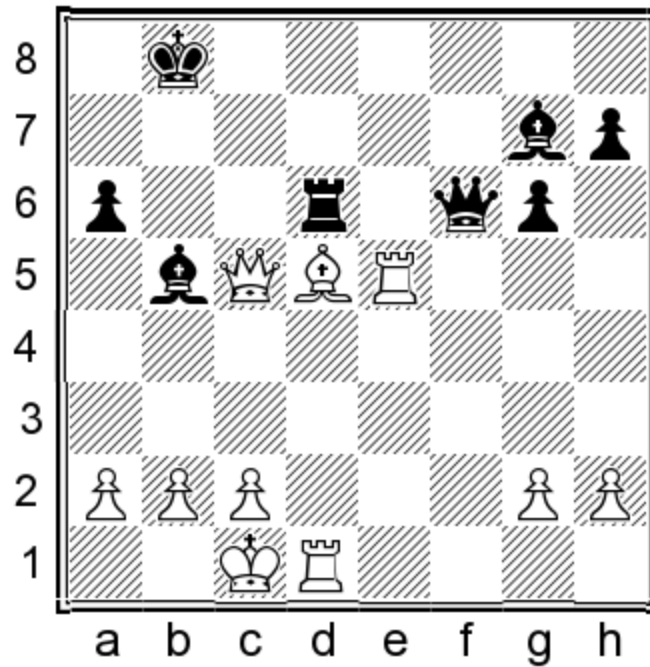
The compensation can last all the way into an endgame, e.g. 23...Nc6 24.Qg4+ Kb7 25.Be5 Bh6+ 26.Kb1 Qf5 27.Qxf5 gxf5 28.Bg3



*Position after: 28.Bg3*

is very unpleasant for Black. White is threatening to capture the b5-bishop and the other Black's light pieces do not look very stable either. 28...Bg5 29.a4! [29.c4 Rxd5! is not so clear.] 29...Bxa4 30.b3 Bb5 31.c4± could be one example of the bishop getting trapped.

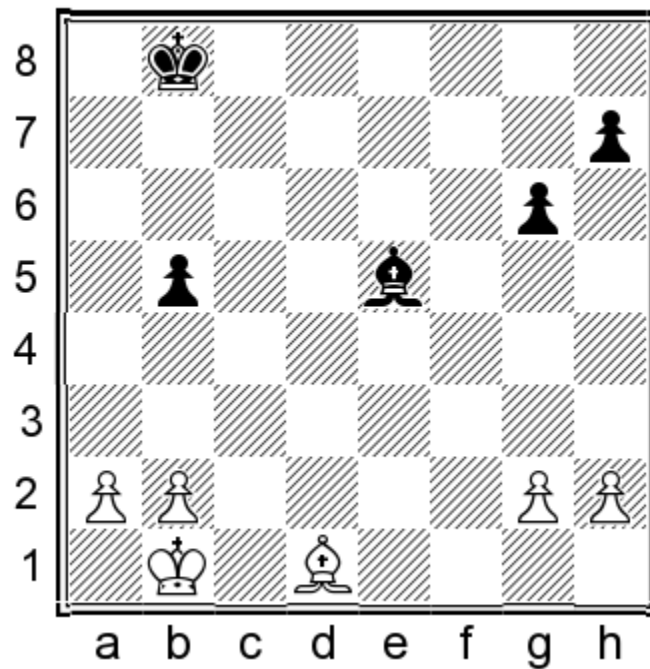
**24.Bxe5 Rxe5 25.Qc5+ Kb8 26.Rxe5 Rd6**



*Position after: 26...Rd6*

If we look a little further, Black seems to be surviving somehow. But if they need to find all the precise moves we have already covered, and even then they can only force an ending like the following...

**27.Bf3 Bh6+ 28.Kb1 Rxd1+ 29.Bxd1 Bg7 30.c4 Qxe5  
31.Qxe5+ Bxe5 32.cxb5 axb5**



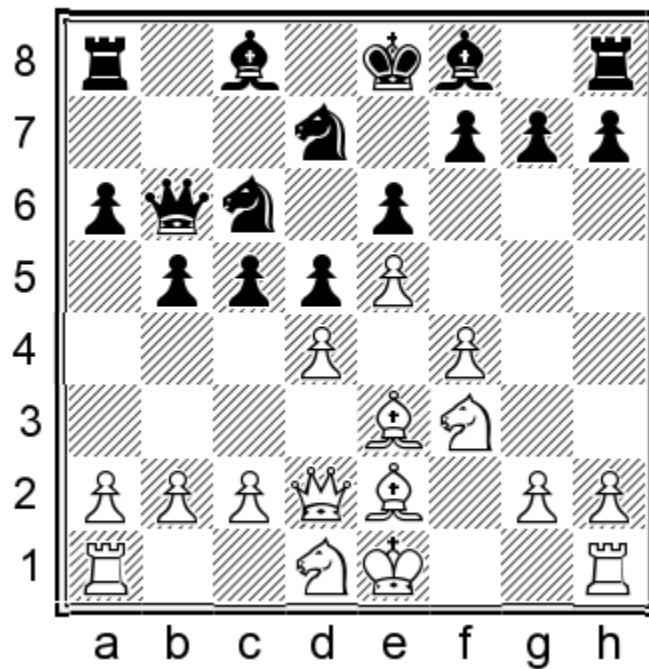
*Position after: 32...axb5*

...where it still remains to be seen whether Black holds the opposite-colored bishop endgame, then I do not think one should be worried about the quality of their opening preparation too much.

**b) 9...Qb6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 a6 8.Qd2 b5 9.Be2 Qb6 10.Nd1**



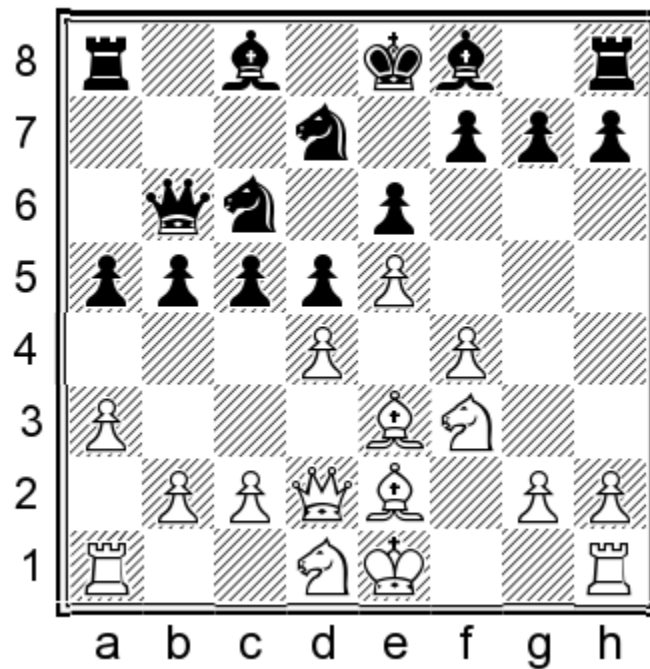


*Position after: 10.Nd1*

Should Black choose to play ...Be7 at any moment, the play will transpose to familiar positions from the ...Be7 chapter of course. What remains is a quick ...b4 or developing the bishop on c5.

### **10...cxd4**

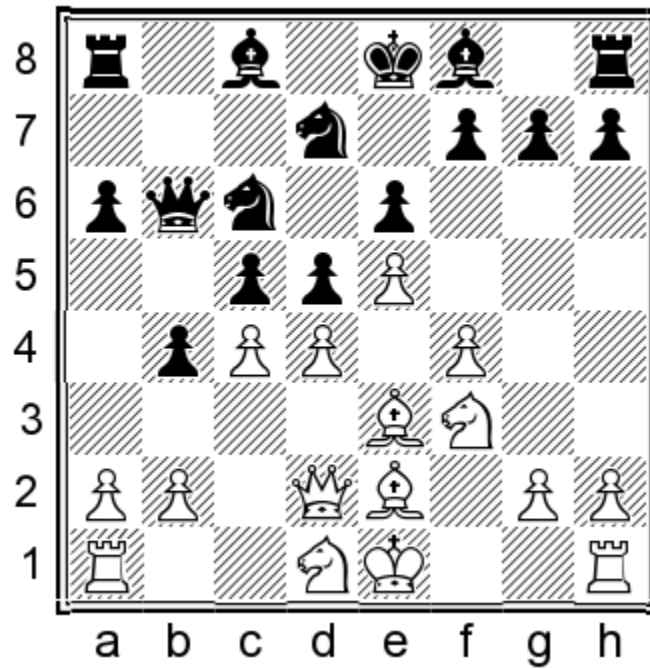
**A)** 10...a5 is bound to the ...Be7 plan so Black will most likely find themselves transposing there after 11.a3!



*Position after: 11.a3!*

(stopping ...b4) 11...Be7 [11...Ba6 12.c3 should not change much because 12...b4 looks premature and White will keep the edge by simple means: 13.axb4 axb4 14.0-0<sup>2</sup> with f4-f5 coming on the next move. Black is lagging behind in development after all!]

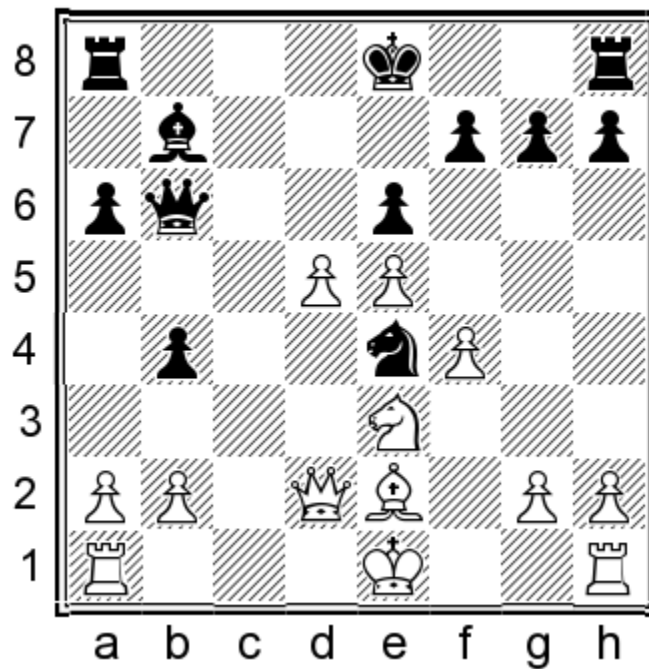
**B)** If we cannot meet 10...b4 with Na4, then we have the other option of 11.c4!



*Position after: 11.c4!*

Black is hardly prepared to open the position so soon.

**B1)** 11...Nxd4 12.Nxd4 cxd4 13.Bxd4 Bc5 14.Bxc5 Nxc5  
15.cxd5 Bb7 16.Ne3 Ne4

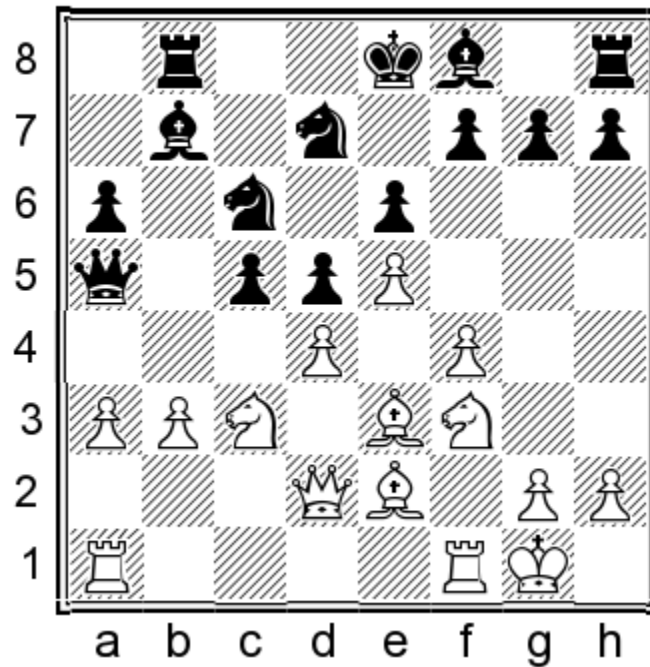


*Position after: 16...Ne4*

is an attempt to be clever but White simply consolidates with 17.Qd3 Bxd5 18.Rd1! (intending Qd4) 18...Rd8 19.Qd4 Nc5, and then finishes development. 20.0-0 0-0 21.Nxd5 Rxd5 22.Qe3<sup>2</sup> Black's queenside pawns are weak and their knight is inferior to White's powerful light-squared bishop.

**B2)** 11...dxc4 12.d5! is as powerful as ever. 12...exd5 13.Qxd5 Be7 14.0-0 0-0 15.Bf2!<sup>±</sup>, planning Nd1-e3.

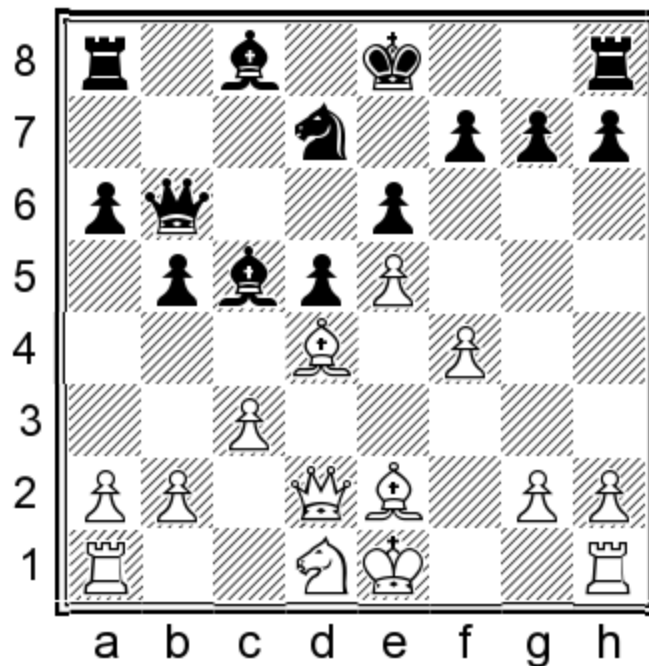
**B3)** 11...bxc3 12.Nxc3 Rb8 13.b3 Qa5 14.0-0 Bb7 15.a3!



*Position after: 15.a3!*

b3-b4 is already a positional threat and Black needs to release the central tension. It is true that they manage to develop their kingside eventually after 15...cxd4 16.Nxd4 Nxd4 17.Bxd4 Bc5 18.Rfc1<sup>2</sup> but I would not hesitate even for a second before taking White here. Black's b7-bishop is rather passive and the a6-pawn will be a terrible weakness in many endgames.

**11.Nxd4 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 Bc5 13.c3**



*Position after: 13.c3*

### **13...b4**

As a matter of fact there are multiple ways of reaching the critical position after White's 17th move, combining ...b4, 0-0, and ...a5 in various move orders. For example 13...0-0 14.0-0 b4 15.Ne3 a5 16.f5 Nxe5 17.f6.

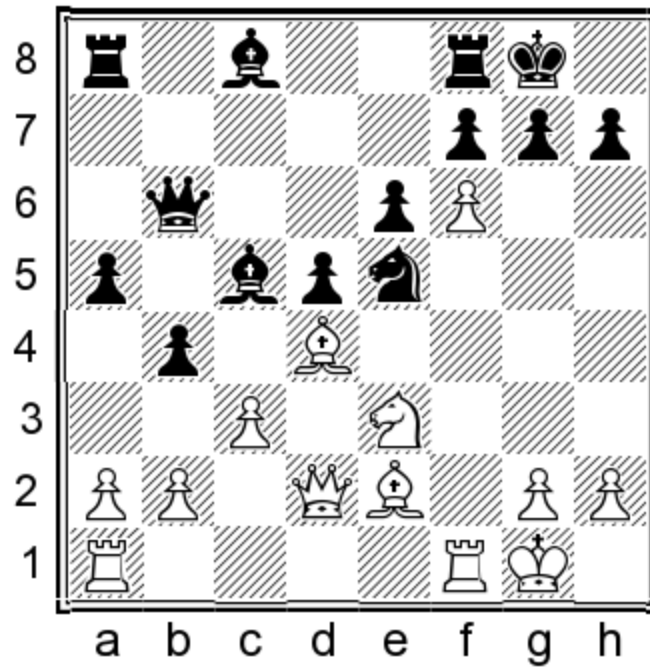
### **14.0-0 a5**

Black can castle first, of course.

### **15.Ne3 0-0 16.f5!**

This is the critical test of the whole Be2 and Nd1 set-up. Black seems to be only slightly worse objectively if they defend perfectly, but their position remains quite tough to play from a practical point of view.

**16...Nxe5 17.f6**

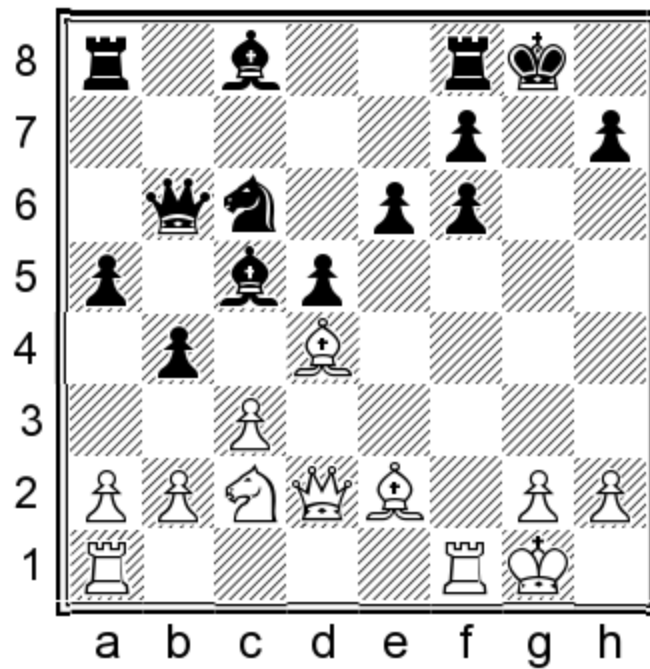


*Position after: 17.f6*

**17...Re8!**

Out of four logical options there is only one that is not lost straight away!

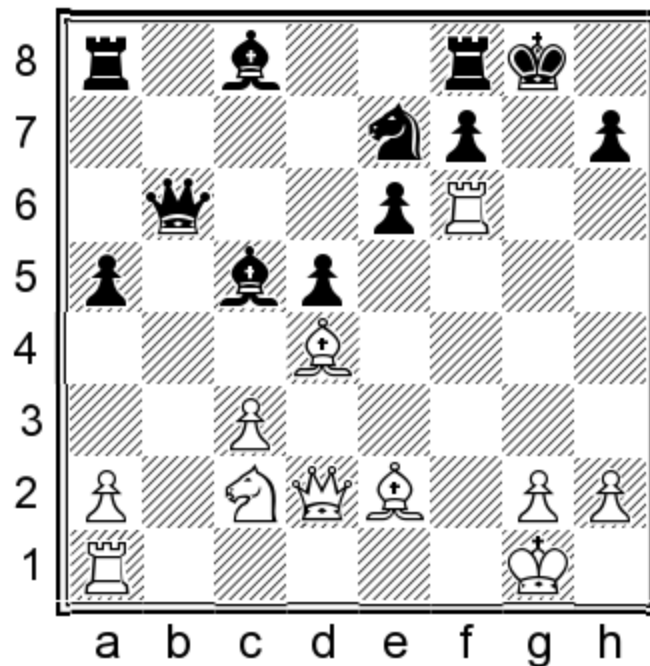
**A)** Moving the knight away from the weakened kingside is very risky and after 17...Nc6 18.Nc2!, strengthening the d4-outpost, White gains a borderline winning advantage after 18...gxf6



*Position after: 18...gxf6*

19.Rf3! [The subtle point is to draw the c6-knight away first, as 19.Rxf6 bxc3 20.bxc3 Nxd4 21.Nxd4 Ba6 $\infty$  sees Black defend successfully.] 19...bxc3 20.bxc3 Ne7 [20...Ne5 21.Rxf6 $\pm$  is similar.] 21.Rxf6! Black had to defend against the threat of Rg3+ & Qh6 somehow.



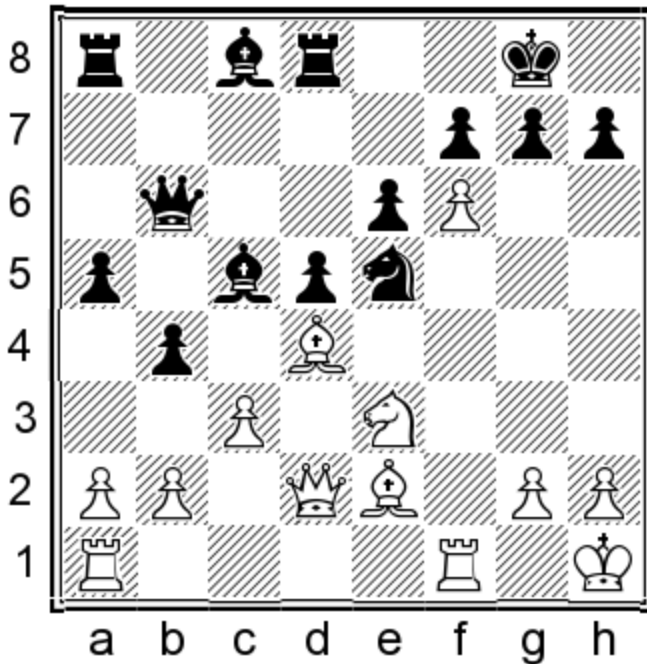


*Position after: 21.Rxf6!*

But now the whole knight trip proves to have been a bit pointless, as Black has failed to swap the dangerous d4-bishop for their knight and the d4-square is now well protected. After 21...Bxd4+ 22.Nxd4 Qc5 23.h4! e5 24.Qg5+ Ng6 25.h5 exd4 26.Bd3! dxc3+ 27.Kh1,, threatening to break through on the g6-square, Black's position is falling apart.

**B)** 17...Bxd4 18.cxd4 is prosaic, Black's dark squares are simply too weak and there is no counterplay on the d4-square. 18...Ng6 [Or 18...Nc6 19.Rad1+-.] 19.Ng4+- **C)** 17...Rd8 was played in Ding - Lei, China 2017 and Ding

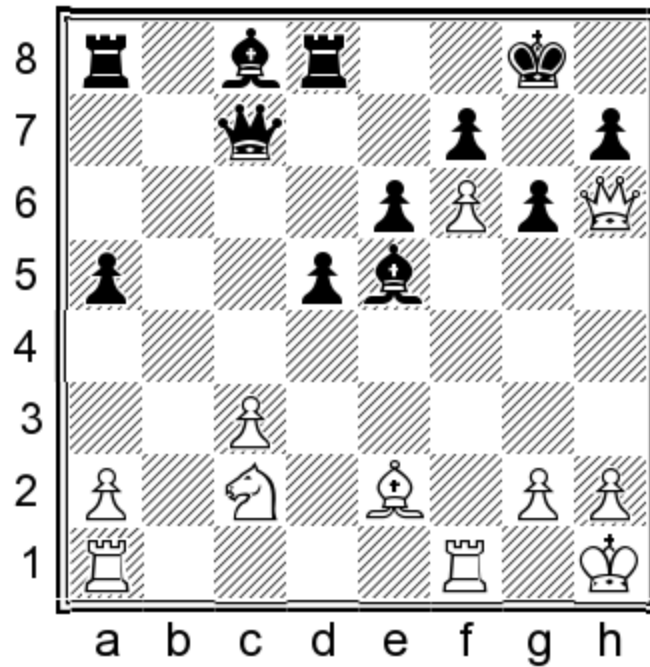
Liren failed to spot the cunning 18.Kh1!,



*Position after: 18.Kh1!*

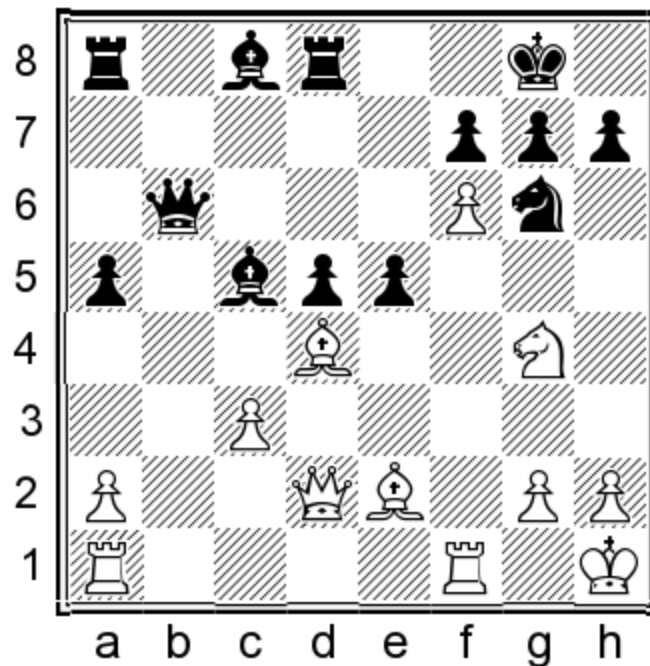
getting out of the unpleasant pin and getting ready to finish Black off on the kingside. It turns out that d8 is not the best place for the rook. 18...bxc3 19.bxc3

**C1)** 19...g6 is weakening dark squares around the king too much and Black fails to hold everything together after 20.Nc2!, e.g. 20...Qc7 21.Qh6 Bf8 22.Qf4 Bd6 23.Bxe5 Bxe5 24.Qh6+- forcing Black to give up a whole piece.



*Position after: 24.Qh6+- Note that 24...Bxf6 25.Rxf6 Qxc3 loses to both Rf1 and the more spectacular (and stronger!) 26.Rxf7! Kxf7 27.Qxh7+ Kf6 [27...Ke8 28.Rf1+-] 28.Rf1+ Ke5 29.Qg7+ Kd6 30.Qxc3+-.*

**C2)** 19...Ng6 20.Ng4! e5



*Position after: 20...e5*

21.Nh6+! gxh6 22.Qxh6 Bf8 23.Bxb6 Bxh6 24.Bxd8+-  
This the key difference between 17...Rd8 and 17...Re8 –  
who would've thought that the rook would be hanging  
seven moves later?

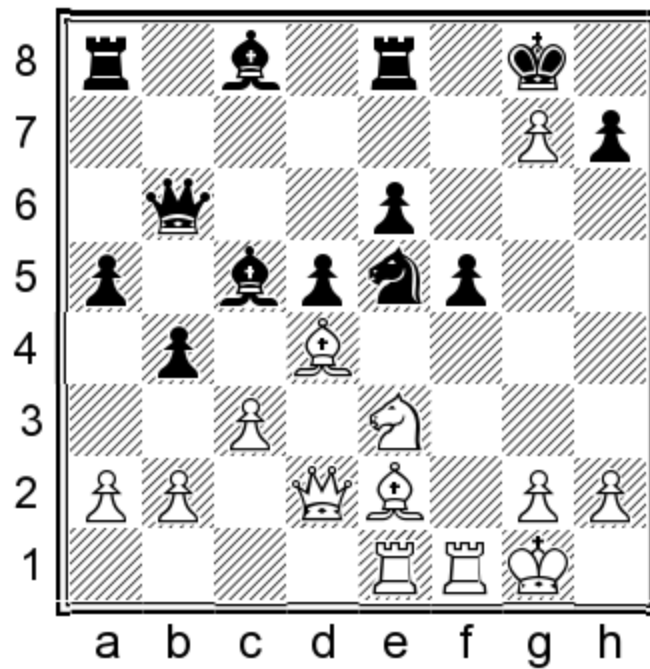
### **18.fxg7**

Now after 18.Kh1 Ng6 19.Ng4 e5! 20.Nh6+ gxh6 21.Qxh6  
Bf8 the rook is not hanging anymore and Black is more  
than fine.

### **18...f5**

White has to resort to a more mundane solution, but the  
rook is not perfect on e8 either, often allowing White to  
gain a tempo with Bh5.

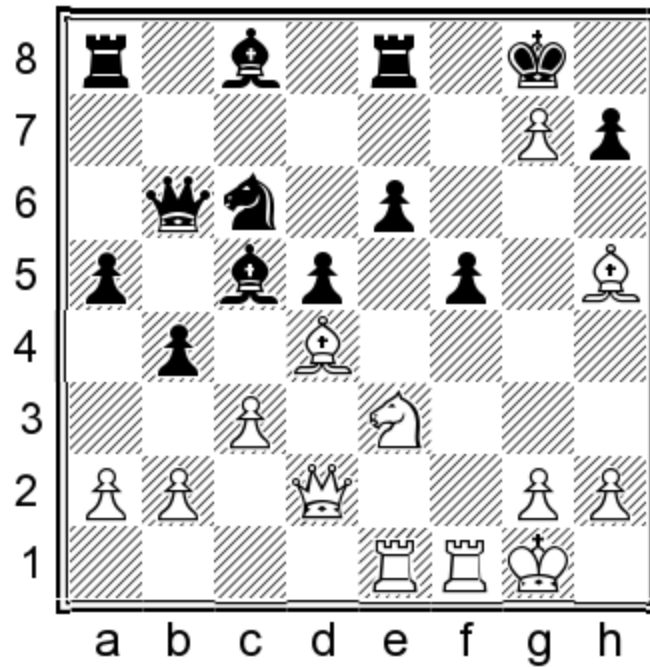
### **19.Rae1**



*Position after: 19.Rae1*

### **19...Bd7**

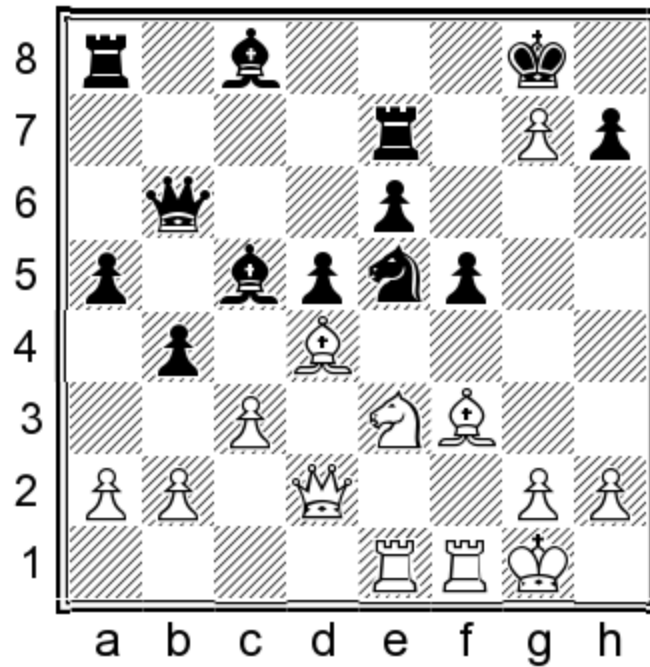
**A)** 19...Nc6 would be a perfect move had the rook been on d8 instead, forcing White to part with their beloved d4-bishop. Here White has a nice Zwischenzug with 20.Bh5!, eventually saving the dark-squared bishop.



*Position after: 20.Bh5!*

20...Rd8 [20...Bxd4 21.Bxe8 bxc3 22.bxc3<sup>2</sup> hardly gives Black sufficient compensation.] 21.Bf6±

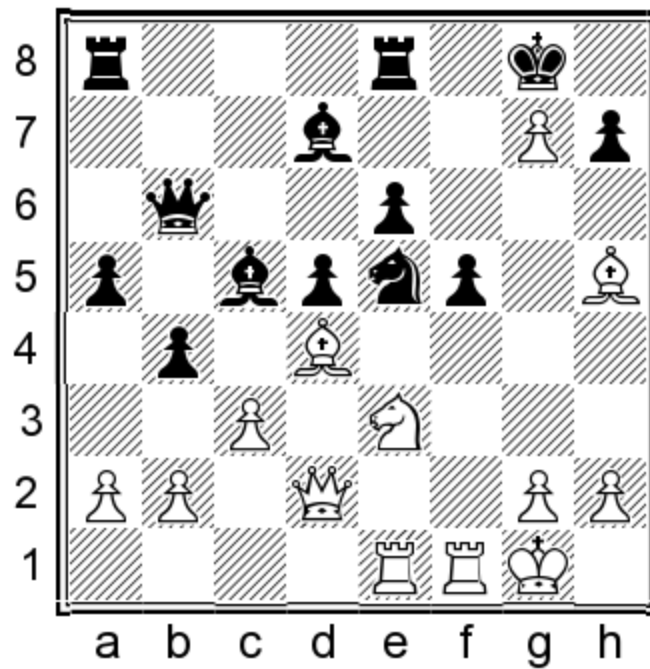
**B)** Foreseeing Bh5 with 19...Re7 is rather artificial and slow. White will have tremendous compensation for the pawn after 20.Bf3, forcing favorable piece exchanges.



*Position after: 20.Bf3*

20...Nxf3+ 21.Rxf3 bxc3 22.bxc3 Bxd4 23.cxd4 Rxc3  
 24.Nf1f White threatens to maneuver their knight to h5 via  
 g3 and although Black is a pawn up, they are clearly on  
 the defensive.

**20.Bh5**

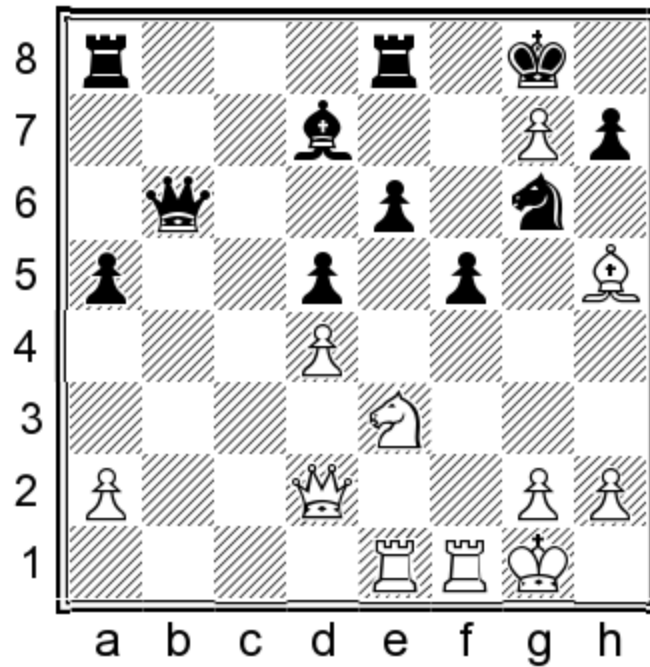


*Position after: 20.Bh5*

**20...Bxd4**

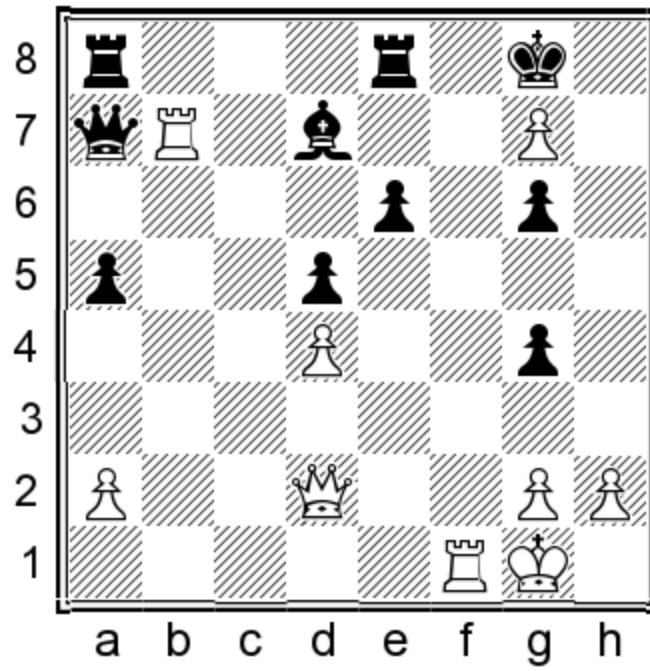
This is a memorable moment for Black to err as 20...bxc3?  
 21.bxc3 Bxd4 22.cxd4 Ng6





*Position after: 22...Ng6*

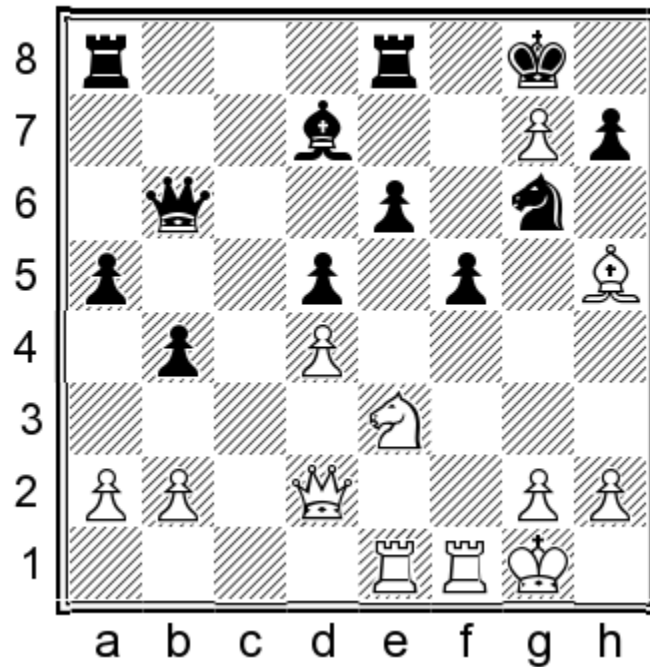
allows White to go for the brilliancy prize with 23.Ng4! fxg4 24.Rb1! Qa7 25.Bxg6 hxg6 26.Rb7!!, drawing the queen away from the check on d4.



*Position after: 26.Rb7!!*

White checkmates after 26...Qxb7 27.Qh6+-.

**21.cxd4 Ng6**



*Position after: 21...Ng6*

## **22.Rf2!?**

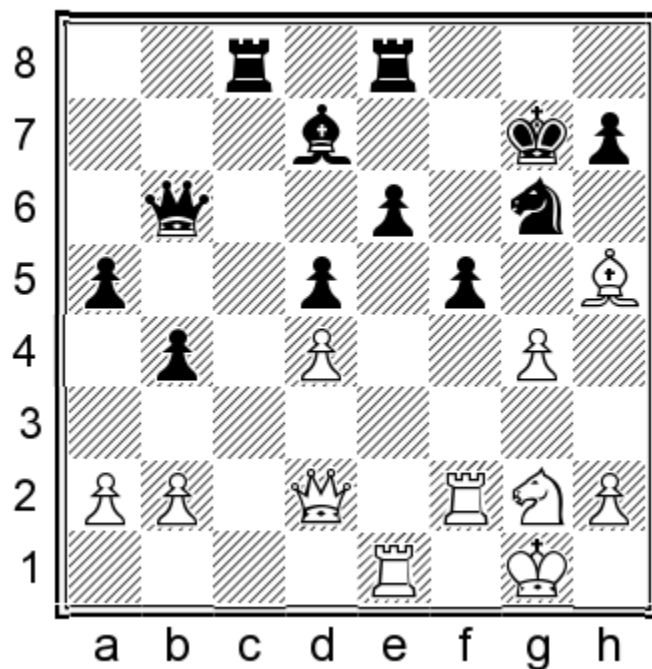
Black will be a symbolic pawn up but with their d7-bishop being condemned to play the role of a big pawn (meaning its only job is to protect e6), White's position will be much more fun to play. It is useful to stop ...Qxd4 from being a check and the rook might join the attack on the kingside via the second rank too.

Sadly, 22.Ng4 only leads to a perpetual now since the Rb1-b7 resource is not there anymore.

## **22...Kxg7 23.g4!**

Black's position remains difficult to handle, and White will gradually increase the pressure on the dark squares. Play might continue...

**23...Rac8 24.Ng2**



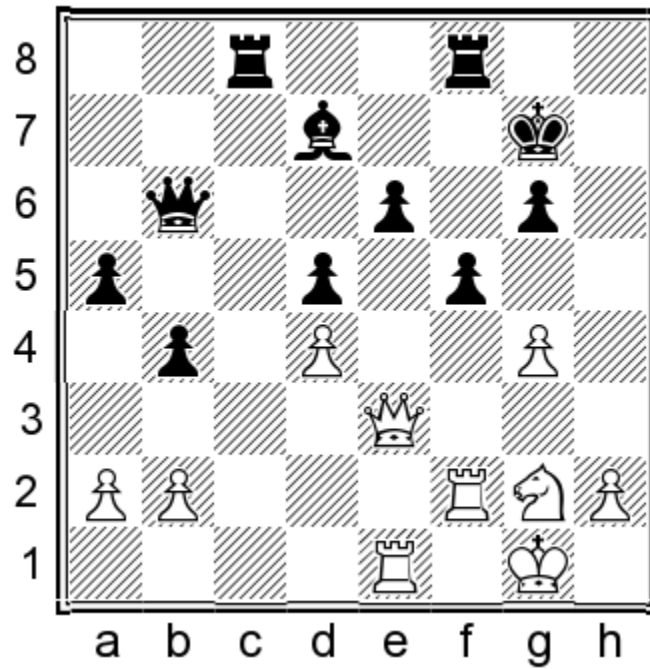
*Position after: 24.Ng2*

**24...Rf8**

**A)** 24...fxg4 25.Bxg6 hxg6 26.Qg5! Qxd4 shows the handiness of the Rf1-f2 maneuver nicely. White has a great attack after 27.Nf4,.

**B)** 24...Qd8 25.h4 Rf8 26.g5±, planning Bxg6 and Nf4, is a dream scenario for White.

**25.Bxg6 hxg6 26.Qe3²**



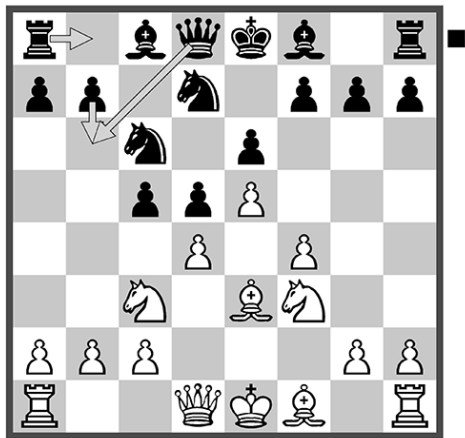
*Position after: 26.Qe3<sup>2</sup>*

Black's position remains quite solid but White enjoys great activity, and so I like their chances, especially in a practical game.

# Chapter 14

## 7th move options for Black

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 14 - 7th move options for Black

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3

a) 7...b6

b) 7...Rb8

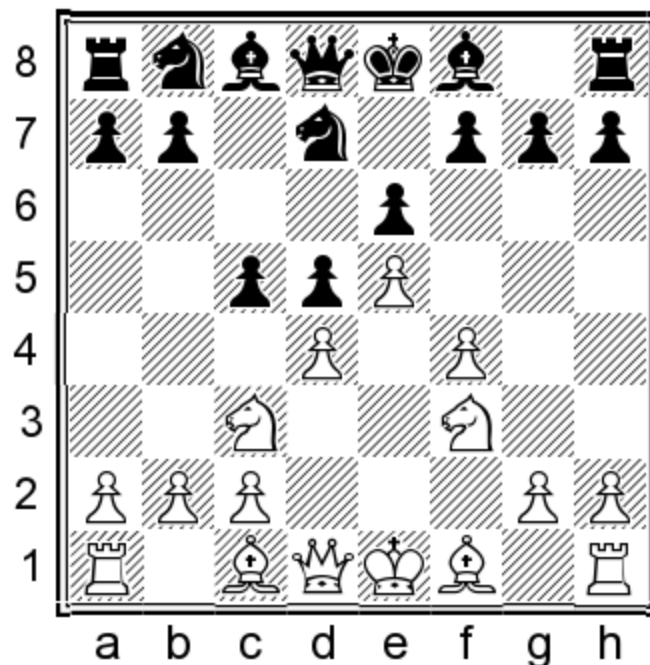
c) 7...Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 --

d) 7...Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 cxd4 & 13...--

e) 7...Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 cxd4 & 13...0-0

**a) 7...b6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3**

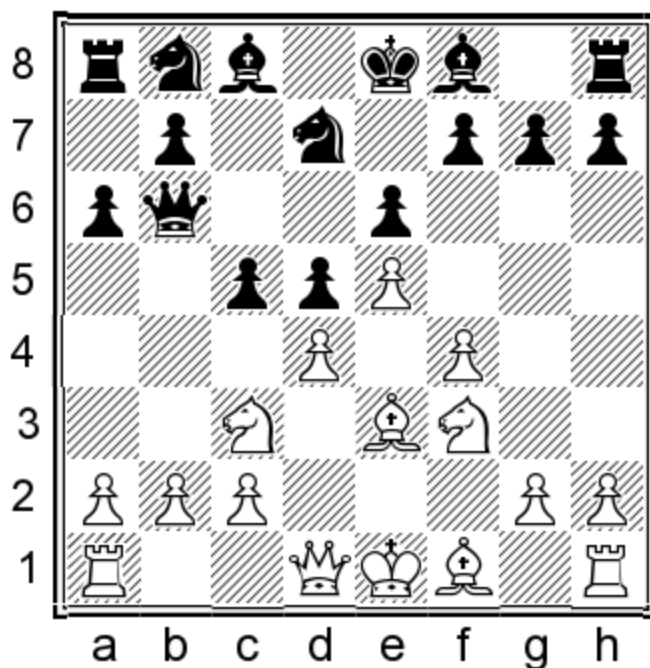


*Position after: 6.Nf3*

This time we will examine the set-ups which include an early ...Qb6 and various other options on move 7, which do not include a pawn exchange in the center. All of them are slightly dated and rather scarce in modern tournament practice.

## 6...Nc6

**A)** After 6...a6 7.Be3 Black should opt for a different system rather than to go for 7...Qb6.



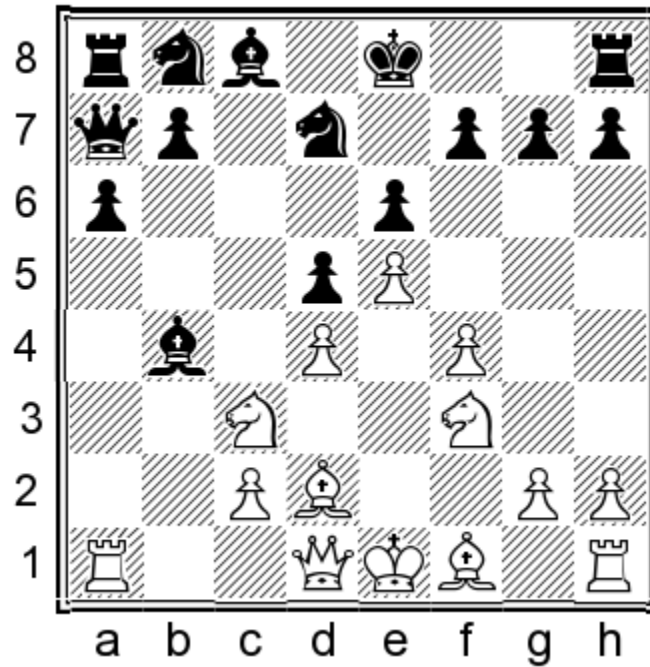
*Position after: 7...Qb6*

White gets a nice endgame here with little effort and natural moves after **A1)** 8.a3! This little move makes pawn grabbing on b2 impossible as well as preparing a subsequent capture on c5.

**A1.1)** 8...Qa7 has been advocated by a handful of grandmasters, but the fact that Nigel Short went down



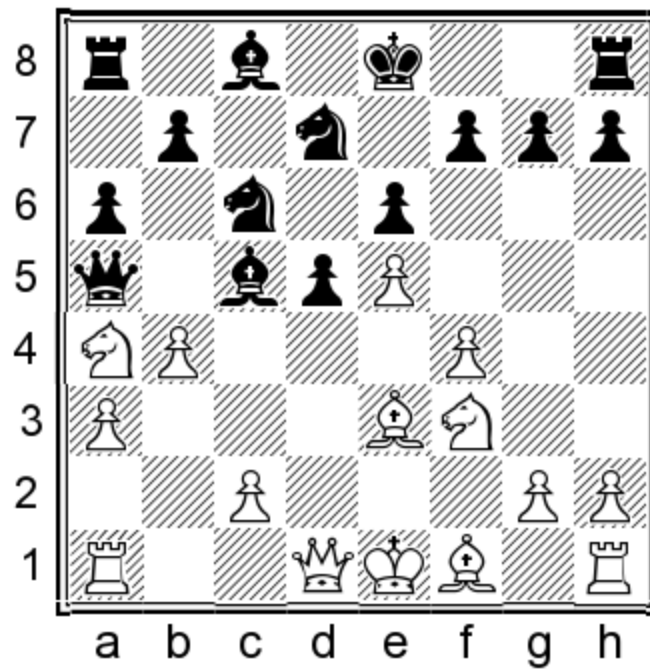
here with Black facing an opponent rated a couple of hundred points lower is probably the most telling. I like the sacrificial 9.b4 cxb4 10.axb4 Bxb4 11.Bd2



*Position after: 11.Bd2*

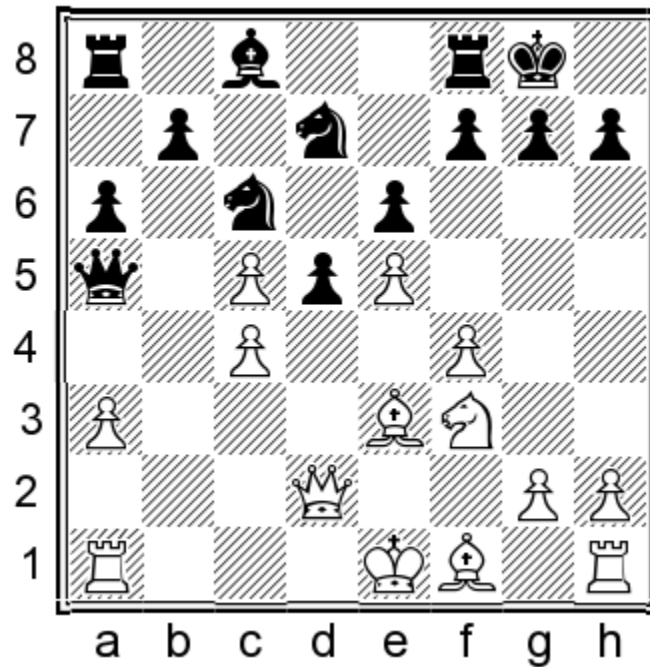
the most, albeit there are multiple ways to obtain an advantage for White. 11...Bxc3 [11...Qb6 12.Nb5! is even worse for Black as White's knight will be incredibly strong on d6.] 12.Bxc3 Nc6 13.Bd3 h6 14.Bb2© Similar positions are well known in the Winawer variation of French - White has given away a pawn but the compensation they enjoy in the form of Black's weakened dark squares is simply tremendous and way above merely being sufficient.

**A1.2)** 8...Nc6 9.dxc5! Bxc5 10.Na4 Qa5+ 11.b4



*Position after: 11.b4*

This is the point of White's 8th move, obtaining the advantage of the bishop pair. Furthermore, after 11...Qxa4 12.bxc5 0-0 13.c4 they will be able to repair their damaged pawn structure a bit and force a pleasant endgame. 13...Qa5+ 14.Qd2



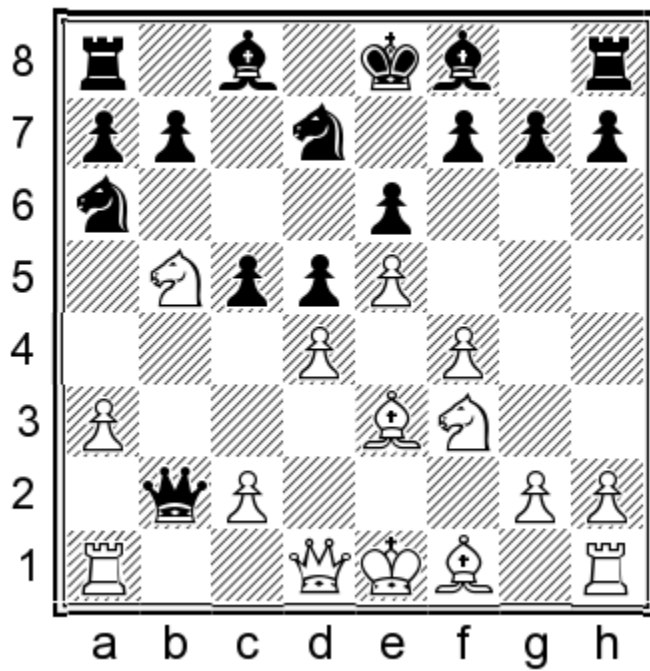
*Position after: 14.Qd2*

14...Qxd2+ [14...Rd8 was played a handful of times too but the verdict remains the same. 15.Qxa5 Nxa5 16.cxd5 exd5 17.Rb1<sup>2</sup>] 15.Kxd2 Rd8 16.Kc3<sup>2</sup> After activating their king White will simply complete development with Rb1, Be2 and, most likely, Rhd1. There is no need to rush to exchange on d5, as the c8-bishop being locked out of play behind Black's pawns is quite an enjoyable outcome for White.

**A2)** It is quite possible to go for 8.Na4 too, and the positions arising after 8...Qa5+ 9.c3 cxd4 10.b4 Qc7 11.Qxd4 Nc6 12.Qd2 have already been tested in practice multiple times. My recommendation seems to be much clearer and straightforward though.

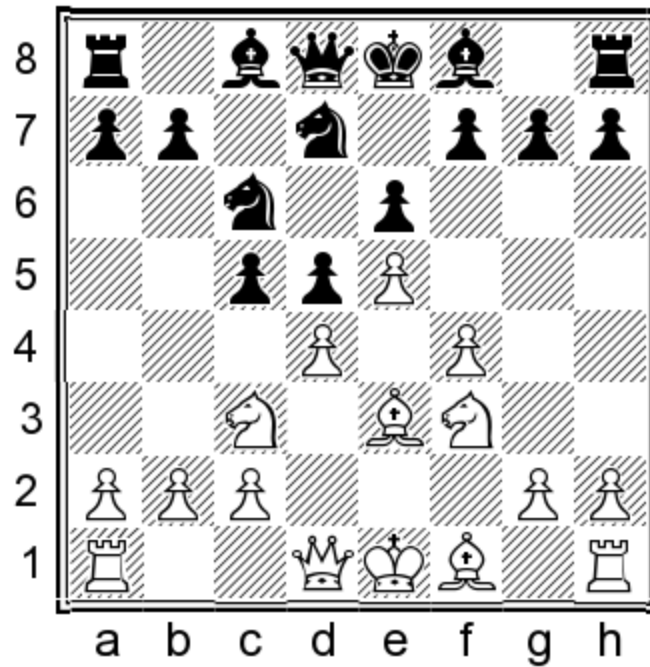
**B)** Let me just note that 6...Qb6 7.Be3 will transpose into other lines after either 7...Nc6 or 7...a6 because 7...Qxb2??

loses on the spot due to 8.Nb5 Na6 9.a3!+-,



*Position after: 9.a3!+- trapping the queen after Rb1 and Qc1.*

**7.Be3**

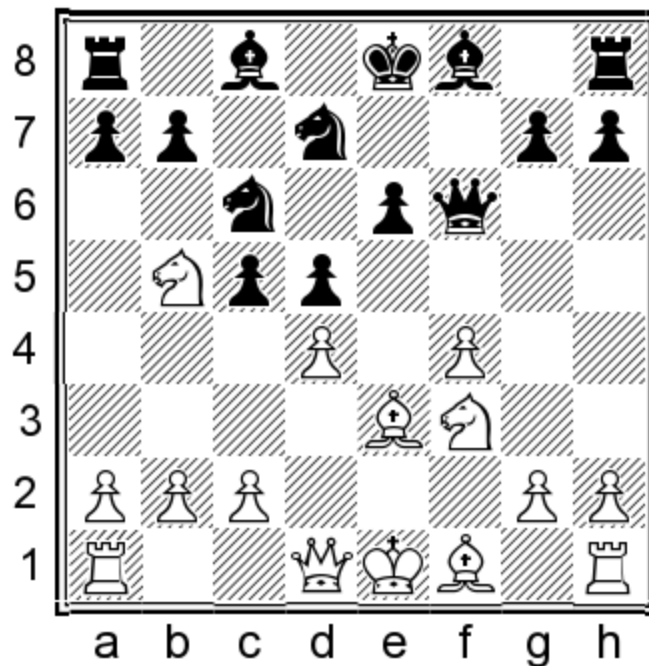


*Position after: 7.Be3*

### **7...b6**

Compared to the ...Be7 Qd2 line that we have already analyzed, here we can utilize the fact that the queen is not committed to d2 yet. Thus it can go directly to the kingside via e1!

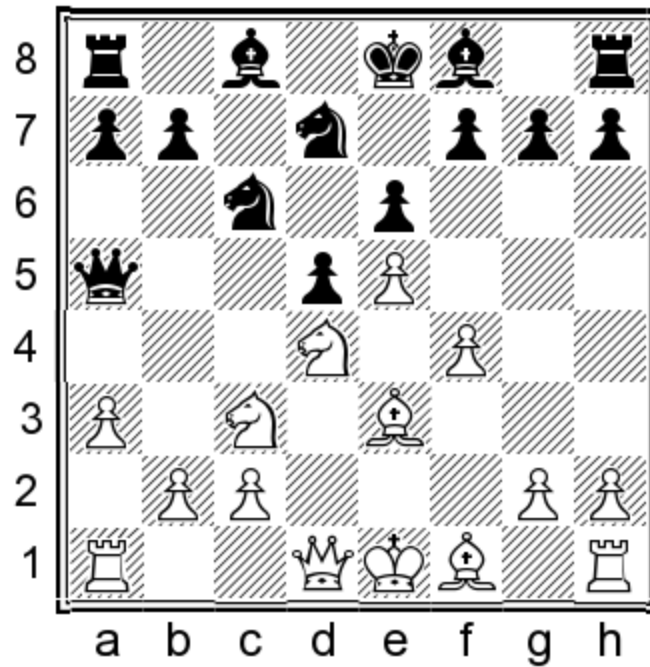
**A)** 7...f6?! is just bad and although it has some historical value, nobody ventures here in the computer age anymore. It is not difficult to establish why: 8.exf6! Qxf6 [8...Nxf6 9.dxc5 Qa5 10.Nd2!± makes it quite difficult to regain the pawn on c5 due to the Nd2-b3 maneuver.] 9.Nb5



*Position after: 9.Nb5*

9...Qd8 [9...cxd4 10.Nfxd4 Bb4+ 11.c3 Ba5 12.Qg4± puts Black under tremendous pressure as well. White is threatening both to capture the e6-pawn, and to swap on c6 and move their bishop to d4.] 10.Ng5! Nf6 11.dxc5+- gives White a great and I daresay even decisive edge. In the past White might have been worried about breaking opening rules like “do not move your already developed knights twice”, but machines and modern chess players tend not to have such prejudices.

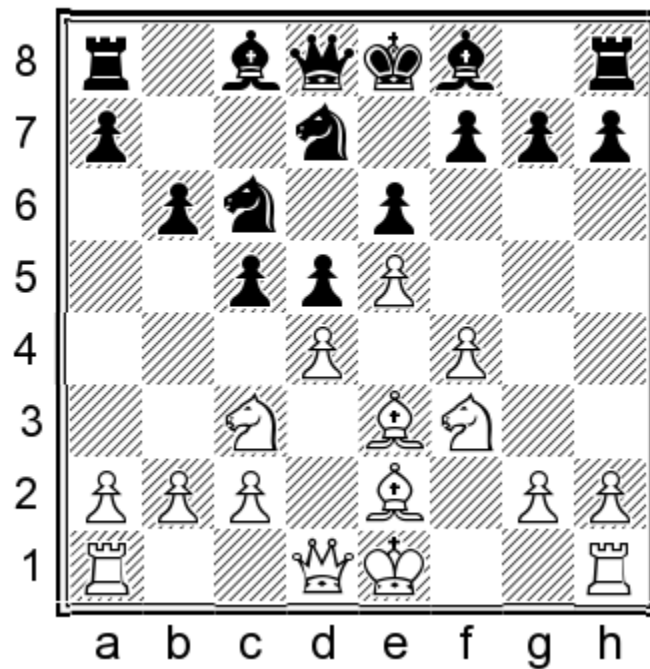
**B)** 7...Qa5 makes little sense as White has not played Qd2 yet, and so the a1-rook won't be hanging in any variations. They can easily force Black to make a concession with 8.a3!, threatening to capture on c5 (thanks to the possibility of b2-b4). After 8...cxd4 9.Nxd4



*Position after: 9.Nxd4*

White is simply clearly better. A possible continuation could be 9...a6 10.Nb3 [Or even 10.Bd3, not fearing 10...Qb6 11.Na4 Qc7 12.0-0±] 10...Qc7 11.Bd3 b5 12.0-0± with an easy to play position. The next moves could be Ne2, c2-c3, and Ned4, returning to the now reinforced d4-outpost.

**8.Be2**

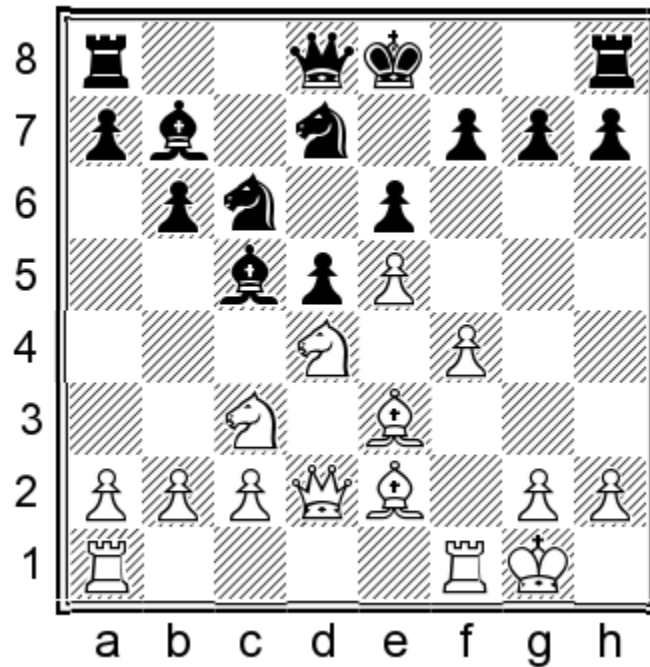


*Position after: 8.Be2*

### **8...Be7**

8...Bb7 9.0-0 will either transpose as White will put their queen on e1 anyway, or force Black to make a committal move. 9...cxd4 [9...Be7 10.Qe1 should transpose indeed; while after 9...Rc8 White can play the other useful waiting move, as Black was obviously waiting for Qe1 to be able to capture on d4 and play ...Bc5 in one move. 10.Kh1] 10.Nxd4 Bc5 11.Qd2

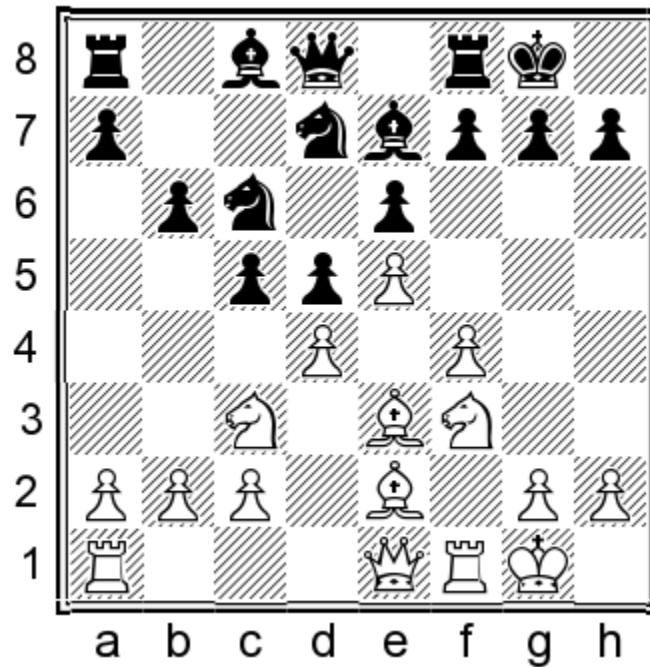




*Position after: 11.Qd2*

White is ready to start the occupation of Black's dark squared with Nb5, e.g. 11...0-0 [Should Black stop the knight maneuver, our favorite 11...a6 12.Nd1 retreat, intending c2-c3 and Nf2, works quite well.] 12.Ncb5 a6 13.Nxc6 Bxc6 14.Nd4<sup>2</sup>.

**9.0-0 0-0 10.Qe1!**



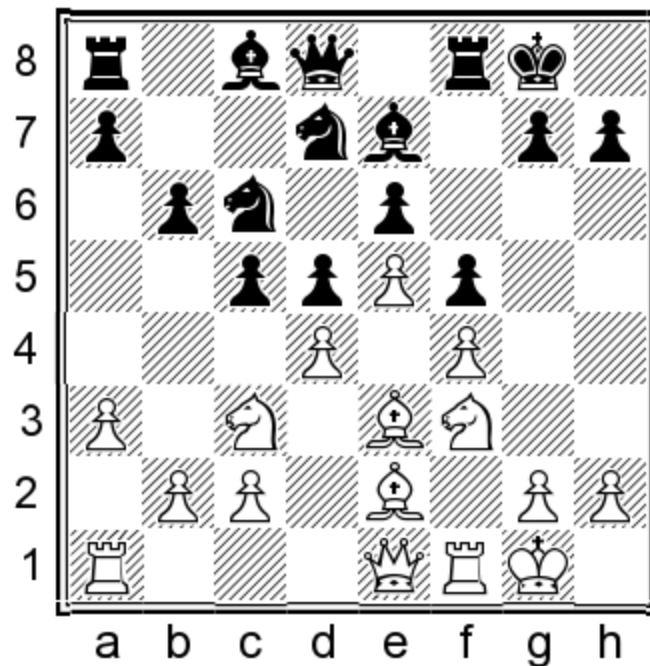
*Position after: 10.Qe1!*

Fulfilling the aforementioned promise.

**10...f6**

Obviously this should be the critical try, destabilizing the center immediately.

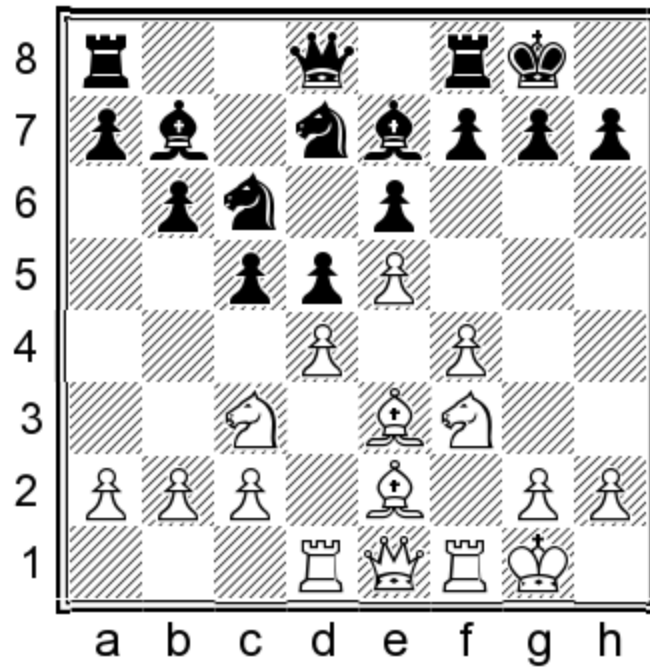
**A)** Closing the middle of the board altogether does not solve all Black problems either. After 10...f5 11.a3!



*Position after: 11.a3!*

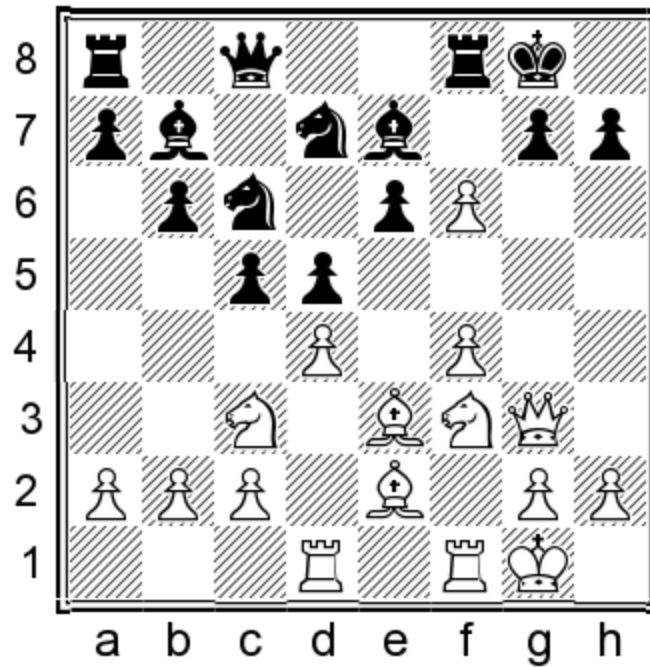
White first takes the b4-square under control which could come in handy if Black captures on d4 – then the first player will be ready to fight for the c5-square immediately with b2-b4. On the other hand, if Black does not clarify the situation in the center, White will proceed with their attack on the kingside with 11...Bb7 12.Rd1 Qc8 13.Kh1! getting ready to play Rg1 and g4.

**B)** 10...Bb7 11.Rd1 Before the queen goes to g3, White should seek to take greater control of the center. [As a matter of fact, 11.Qg3 f5! 12.exf6 Bxf6 is not so simple.]



*Position after: 11.Rd1*

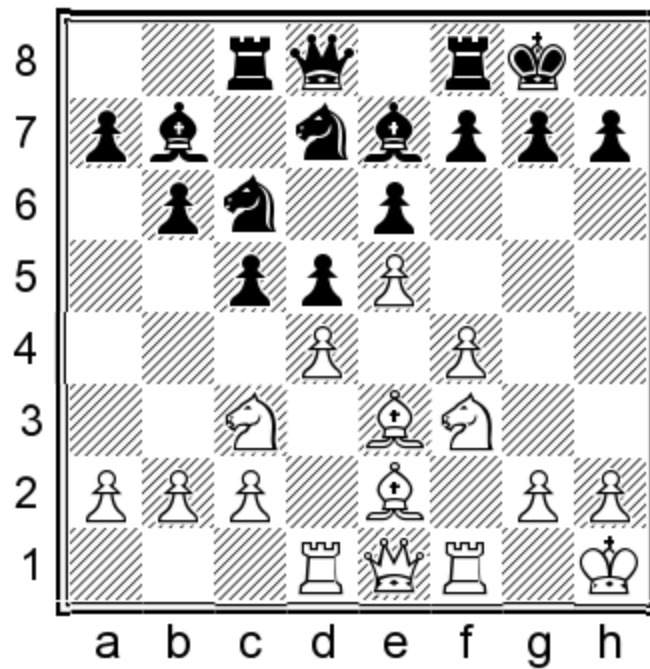
**B1)** 11...Qc8, as played in Inarkiev – Oms Pallisse, Barcelona 2010, looks quite awkward and White was comfortably better after 12.Qg3 f5 13.exf6



*Position after: 13.exf6*

13...Nxf6 [13...Bxf6 is just bad as ...cxd4 is not a piece-winning threat anymore. 14.Qh3±; 13...Rxf6 14.f5 Rxf5 15.Bd3 Rh5 16.Bg5] 14.Qh3².

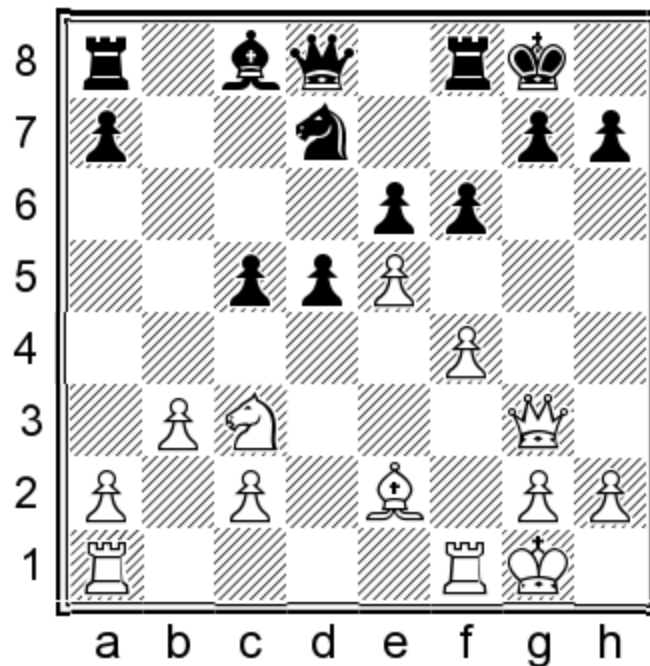
**B2)** 11...Rc8 12.Kh1!



*Position after: 12.Kh1!*

Yet another preparatory move, getting ready for the g2-g4 push should Black counter Qg3 with ...f5. Now that everything is ready White's next move on the agenda is Qe1-g3 and 12...cxd4 13.Nxd4 Nxd4 14.Bxd4<sup>2</sup> will not change much.

**11.Qg3 cxd4 12.Nxd4 Nxd4 13.Bxd4 Bc5 14.Bxc5 bxc5 15.b3!**

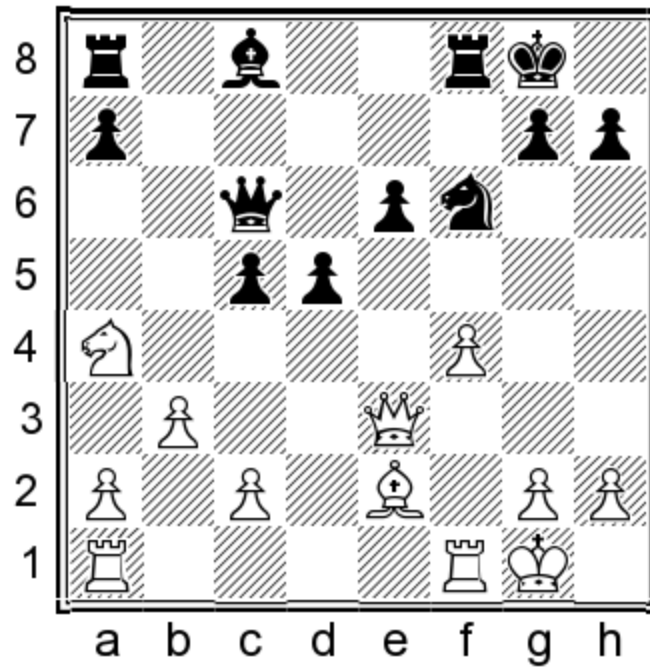


*Position after: 15.b3!*

Black's troubles are still far from being over. The e6-pawn is rather weak and they need to watch out for the Nb5-d6 maneuver, occupying the weakened d6-square.

### **15...Qe7**

One of the finer points of White's last move can be seen after the natural 15...Qb6 when White hits the c5-pawn with 16.exf6 Nxf6 17.Na4! Qc6 18.Qe3! and it is quite difficult for Black to hold everything together.

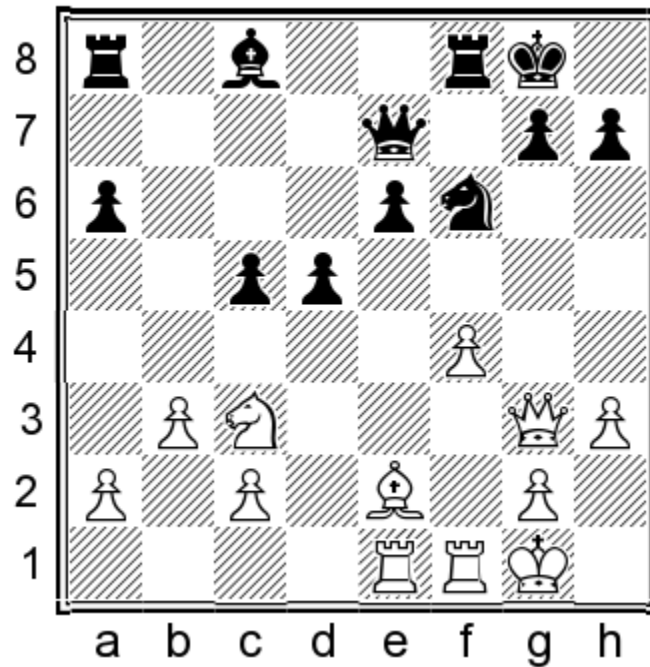


*Position after: 18.Qe3!*

The b2-b3 move is critical here since it gives White's knight the necessary stability.

**16.h3 a6 17.exf6 Nxf6 18.Rae1<sup>2</sup>**



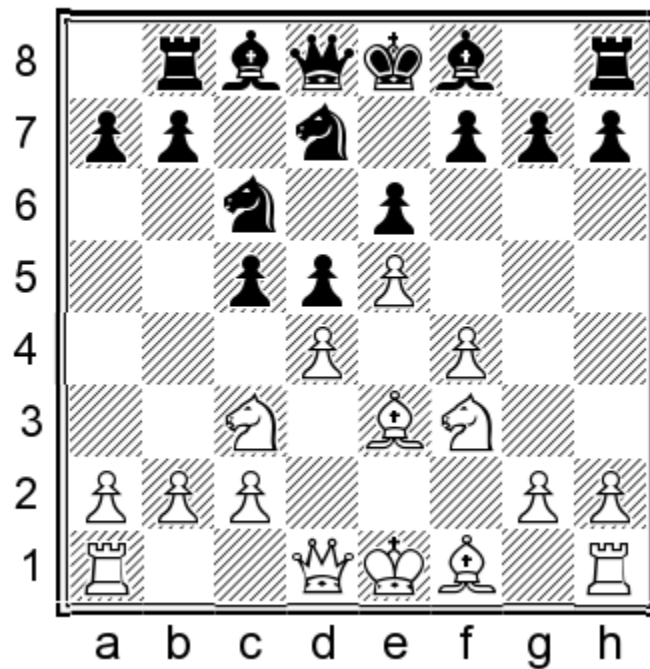


*Position after: 18.Rae1<sup>2</sup>*

This was played in the correspondence game Kubicki – Tomczak, ICCF email 2017. Although Black ultimately managed to hold, their position was far from pleasant to play.

**b) 7...Rb8**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Rb8**



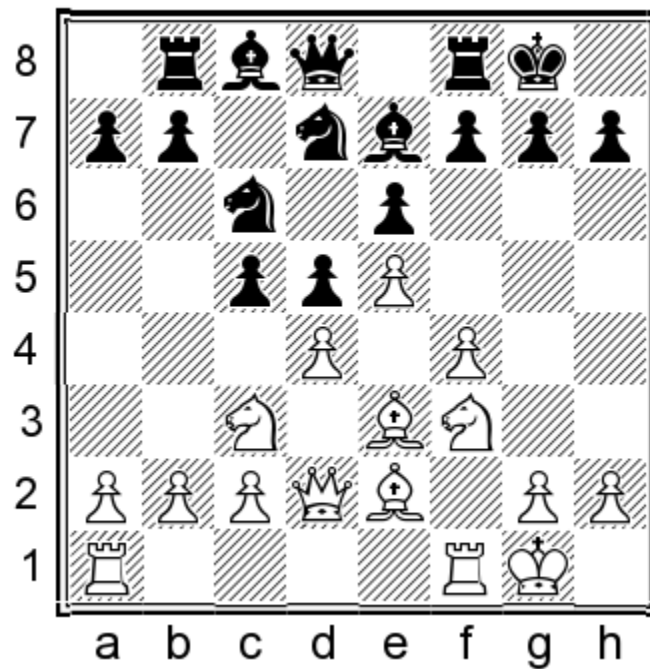
*Position after: 7...Rb8*

This move might look a bit mysterious but it should be taken seriously as well. It has been tried even by elite players such as Nakamura, Wang Hao, and Ivanchuk. Since Black is obviously getting ready to start a queenside pawn storm, it is a good time for us to switch our play to the other side again.

## **8.Be2 Qa5**

This is critical, trying to justify ...Rb8 by pushing ...b5 in one move. White has a strong antidote though, effectively killing the whole idea of 7...Rb8.

**A) 8...Be7 9.0-0 0-0 10.Qd2**

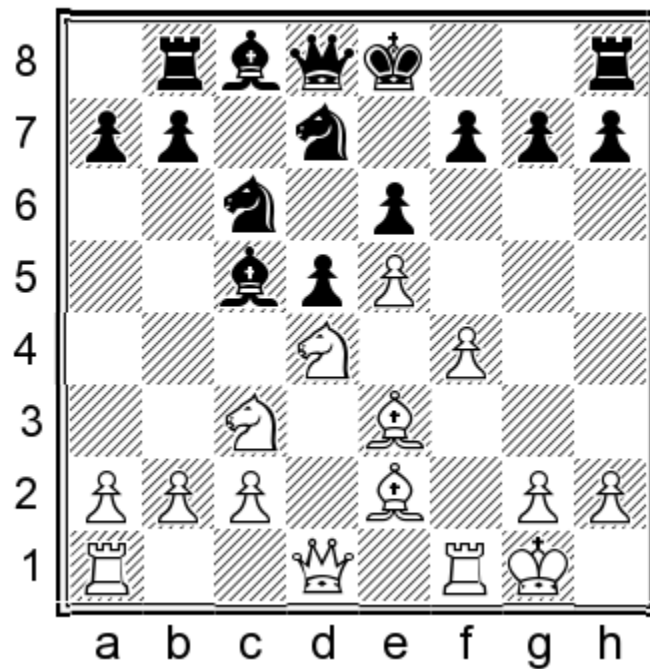


*Position after: 10.Qd2*

**A1)** There is a reason why Black needs ...b6 to play the standard move 10...f6. After 11.exf6 Nxf6 their c5-pawn was left unprotected 12.dxc5!<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, if Black includes ...b6, then 7...Rb8 looks utterly ridiculous.

**A2)** 10...a6 11.Nd1<sup>2</sup> White gets their typical play after a subsequent c2-c3. The Rb8 does not seem to be very beneficial for Black here.

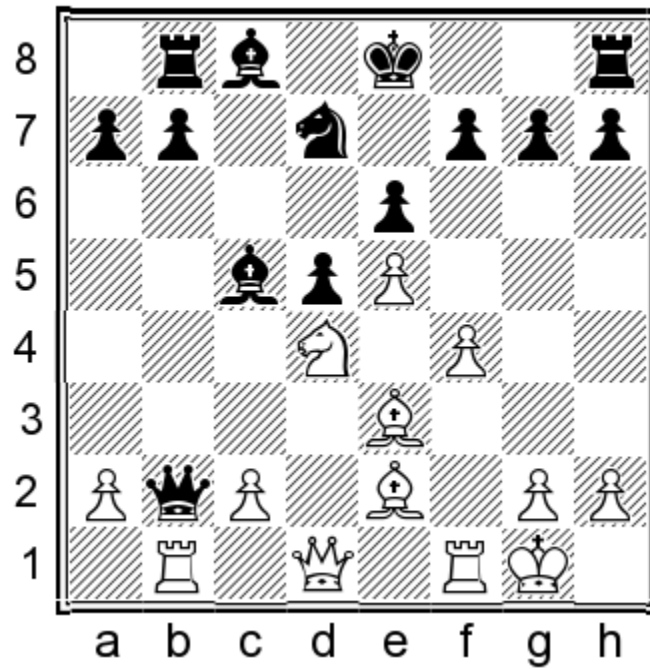
**B)** 8...cxd4 9.Nxd4 Bc5 Here 7...Rb8 again proves to be a waste of time. Black fails to generate enough pressure on the a7-g1 diagonal. 10.0-0



*Position after: 10.0-0*

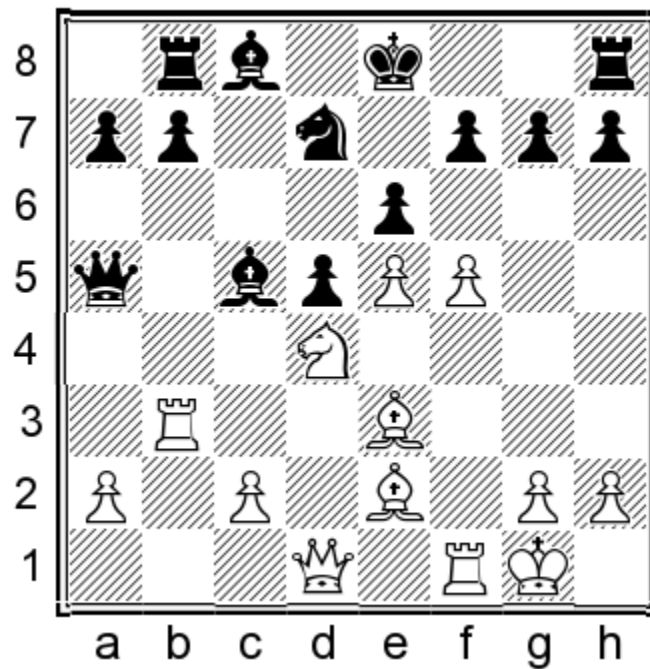
**B1)** 10...Qb6 11.Ncb5! sees Black being short exactly one move (which they used for 7...Rb8). If the defender does not do anything, White will just reinforce the center with c2-c3 and toy with ideas like b2-b4 or Nd6+. Therefore immediate action is called for.

**B1.1)** The greedy 11...Nxd4 12.Nxd4! Qxb2 capture sees Black come under serious pressure after 13.Rb1



*Position after: 13.Rb1*

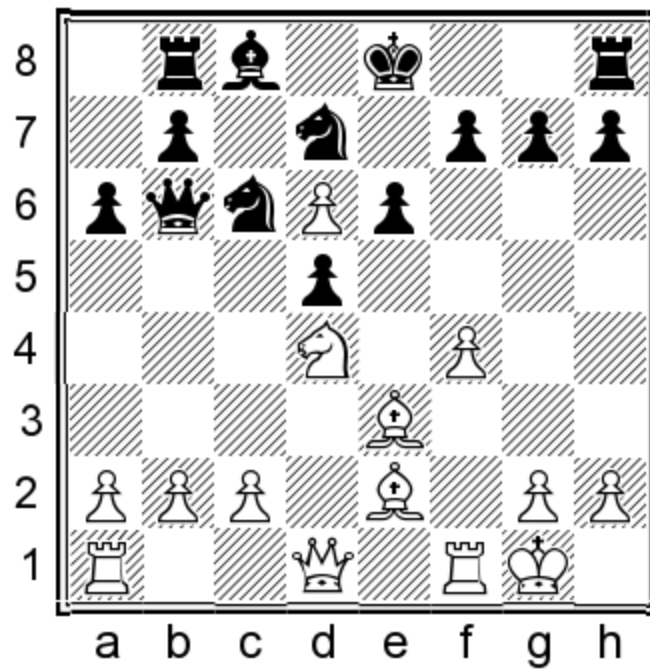
13...Qc3 [13...Qxa2 is even worse: 14.Qd2 (threatening Ra1 and Rfb1) 14...Bxd4 15.Bxd4 Qa3 16.f5, when Black's dark-squared bishop is dearly missed.] 14.Rb3 Qa5 15.f5!



*Position after: 15.f5!*

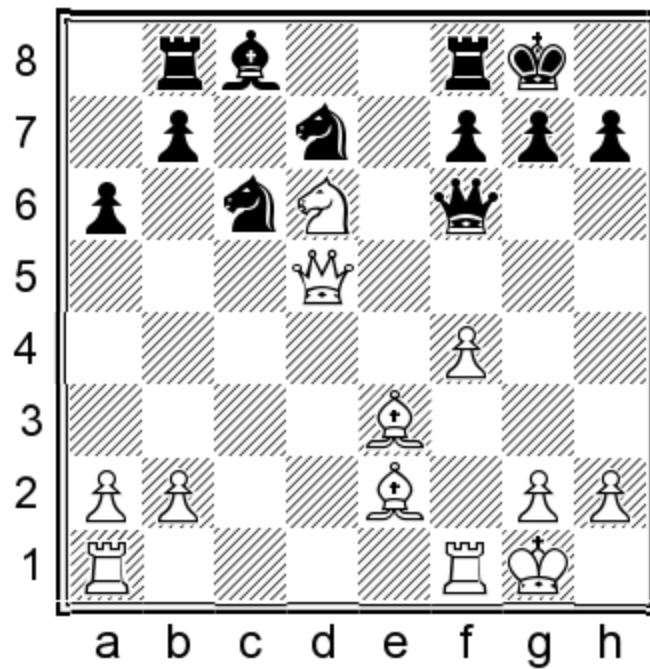
As a matter of fact, had Black not captured the b2-pawn, White's attack would be much slower, but now the queen's rook will join the attack quickly via the 3rd rank. There is no way Black can survive the onslaught after 15...0-0 16.f6,.

**B1.2)** 11...a6 12.Nd6+ Bxd6 13.exd6



*Position after: 13.exd6*

White will push c2-c4 next, opening up the position for their bishop pair. 13...Qb4 14.c4 Qxd6 15.cxd5 exd5  
Black is temporarily a pawn up but the tactical sequence is not over yet! 16.Nf5 Qf6 17.Qxd5 0-0 18.Nd6±



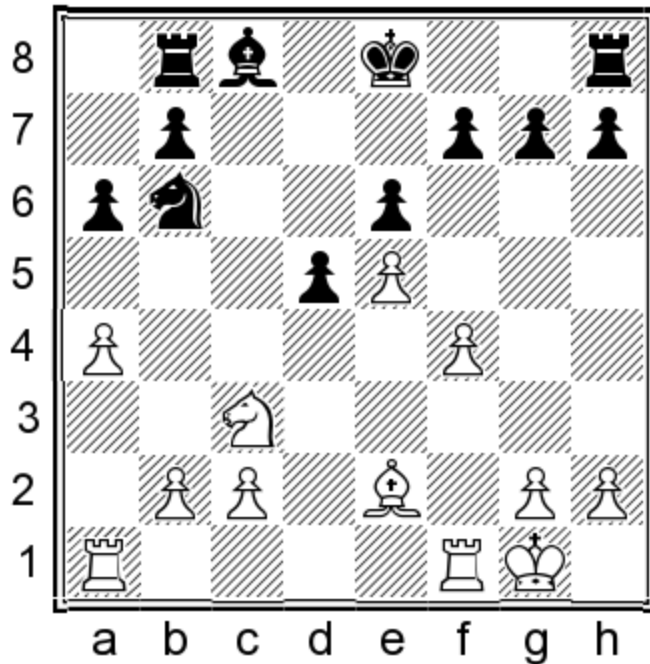
*Position after: 18.Nd6±*

White is clearly on top. All of their pieces are superior to their black counterparts and it is difficult to suggest a sensible move for Black here.

**B2)** 10...a6 11.Qd2 White is getting ready for the usual Nd1 set-up. The endgame arising after 11...Nxd4 12.Bxd4



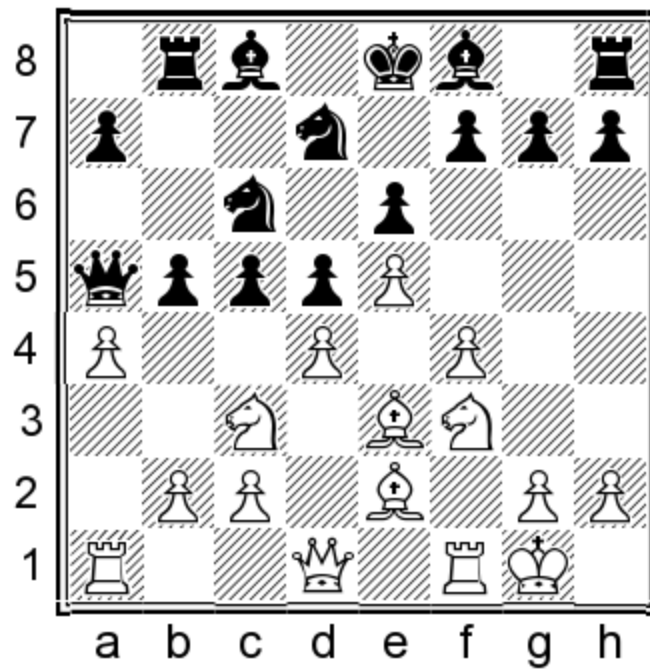
Bxd4+ 13.Qxd4 Qb6 14.Qxb6 Nxb6 15.a4!²,



*Position after: 15.a4!²*

with a4-a5 to come, fixing Black's pawn structure, is quite grim for the second player as well.

**9.0-0 b5 10.a4!**



*Position after: 10.a4!*

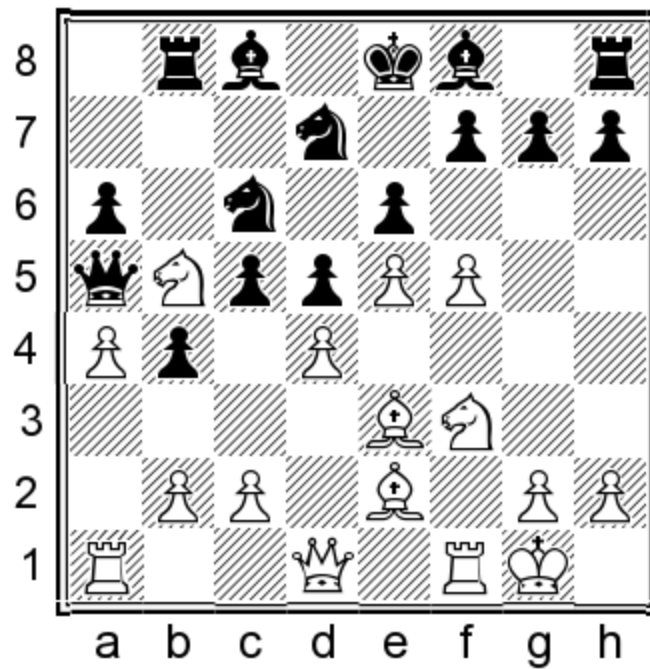
It turns out that the second player is much less prepared for an open fight. Black would certainly like to keep the position closed 10...b4

10...bxa4 11.Nxa4+- is simply awful.

**11.Nb5 a6**

but the issue with Black adopting this approach is that White is far from obliged to move the b5-knight away.

**12.f5!**



*Position after: 12.f5!*

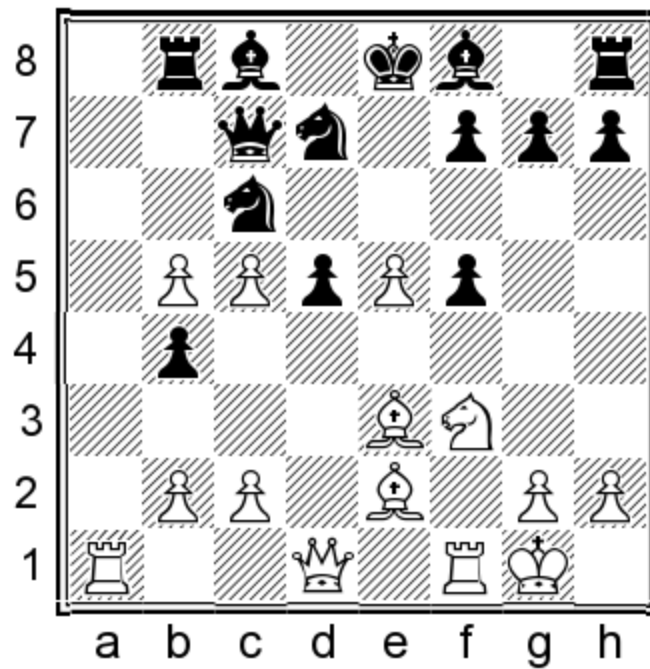
### **12...exf5**

12.f5 can hardly be considered a piece sacrifice as if 12...axb5 then 13.axb5 immediately recovers the sacrificed material.

### **13.dxc5 axb5**

Black's position is falling apart, 13...Bxc5 14.Bxc5 Nxc5 15.Qxd5+- is even less resilient.

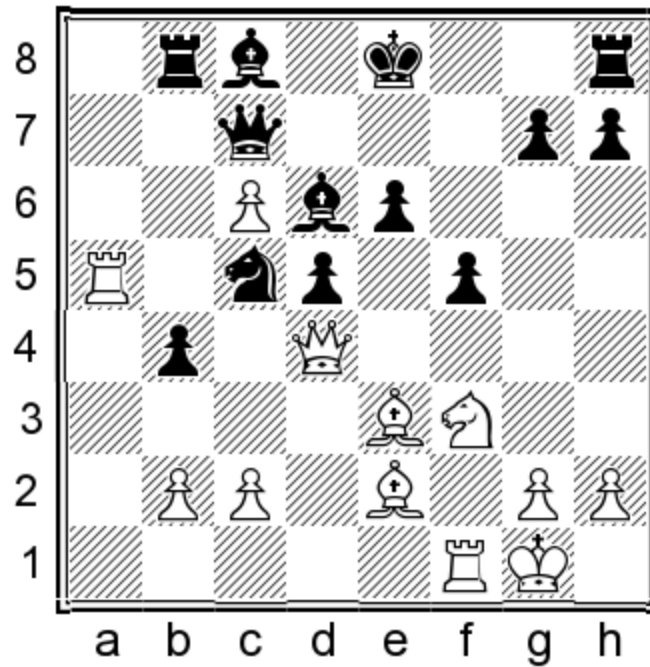
### **14.axb5 Qc7**



*Position after: 14...Qc7*

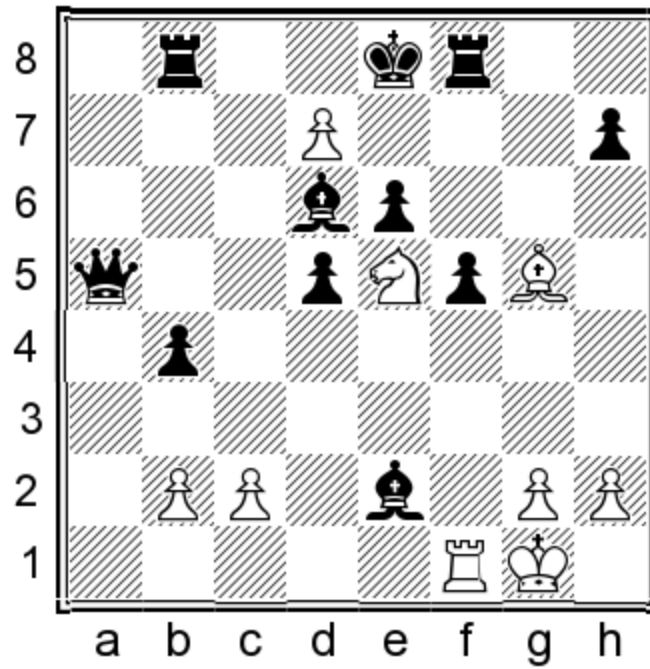
White has multiple ways of finishing Black off and the simplest is 15.b6!

I cannot resist showing you the following brilliant line as well, although it is a little impractical for humans. 15.e6!? fxe6 16.bxc6 Nxc5 17.Qd4 Bd6 18.Ra5!!



*Position after: 18.Ra5!!*

If Black retreats their knight, White's rook will penetrate the 7th rank with decisive effect. Therefore 18...Qxa5 19.Qxg7 Rf8 is forced and now it is time for the magnificent 20.Ne5 Ba6 21.Bg5! Bxe2 22.Qd7+! Nxd7 23.cxd7#.

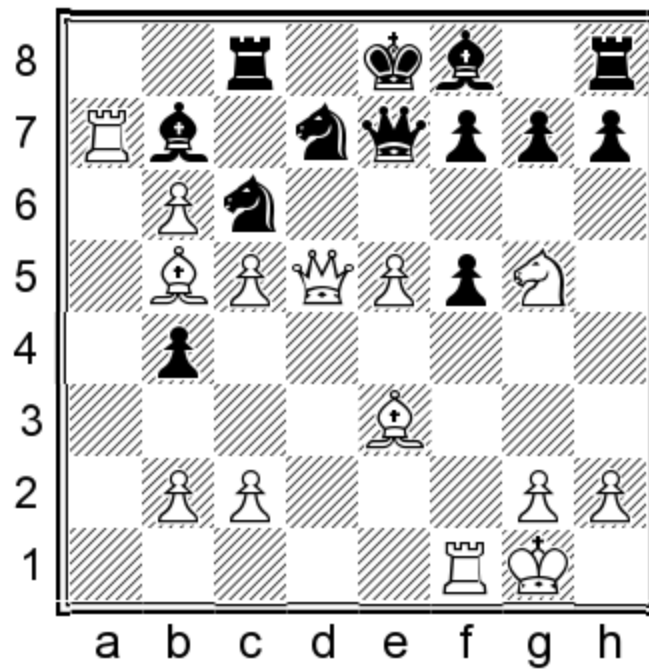


*Position after: 23.cxd7#*

A picturesque finale!

**15...Qd8 16.Qxd5 Bb7 17.Bb5 Rc8 18.Ng5 Qe7**

Black is clearly holding by the skin of their teeth and...

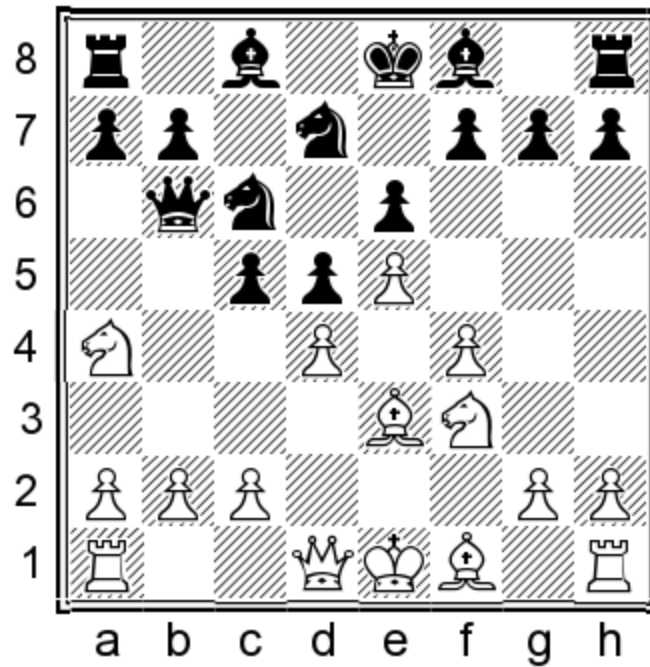


**19.Ra7!+-**

*Position after: 19.Ra7!+- should force immediate resignation.*

**c) 7...Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 --**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Qb6 8.Na4**

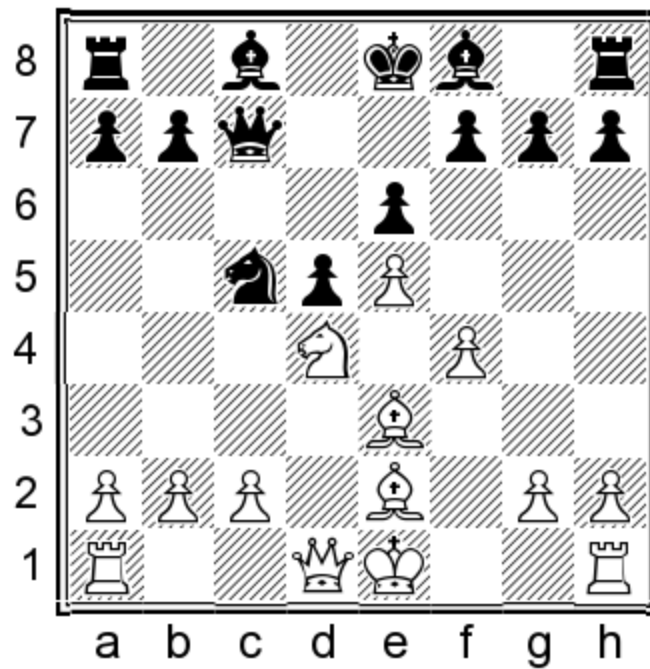


*Position after: 8.Na4*

**8...Qa5+**

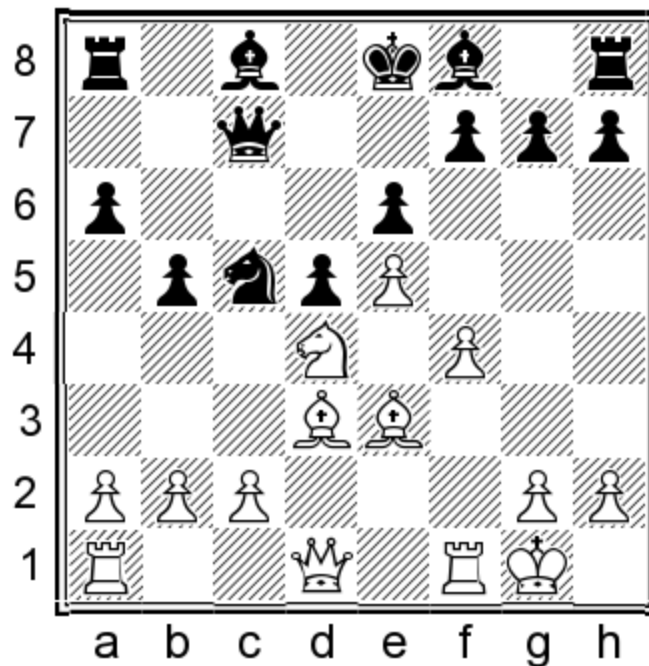
**A)** Surprisingly 8...Qc7?! is clearly the best scoring move here but in reality it makes White's task remarkably easy after the following simplifications. 9.Nxc5! Nxd4 [9...Nxc5? 10.dxc5 Qa5+ 11.Qd2+- simply leaves Black a pawn down.] 10.Nxd4 Nxc5 11.Be2





*Position after: 11.Be2*

**A1)** Considering that White's plan is to finish their development and push c2-c4, it makes sense to investigate 11...a6!? 12.0-0 b5 as well. Here Black's king will find itself trapped in the center though. 13.Bd3!

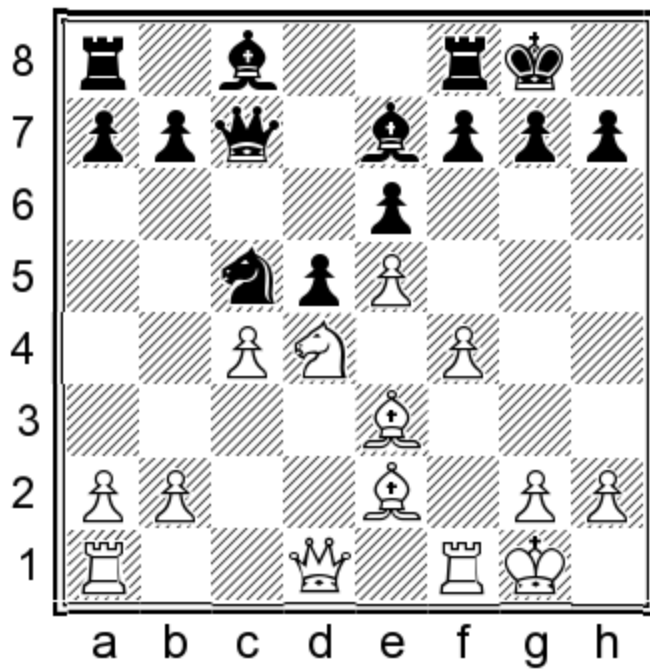


*Position after: 13.Bd3!*

**A1.1)** Thanks to Black lagging behind in development so much there is no need to worry about ceding the bishop pair edge after 13...Nxd3 14.cxd3 because it only contributes to White's cause of opening the position, e.g. 14...Bd7 15.Rc1 Qd8 16.Qg4!± and Black looks completely miserable again.

**A1.2)** 13...Be7 14.Qh5!± White's army is ready for the battle while half of their opponent's army is still asleep. The position is already very tough for the defender as they cannot castle on either side and after Rae1 and f4-f5 the middle of the board won't be safe either.

**A2)** 11...Be7 12.0-0 0-0 13.c4!² After opening the position we will have a large spatial advantage, whilst

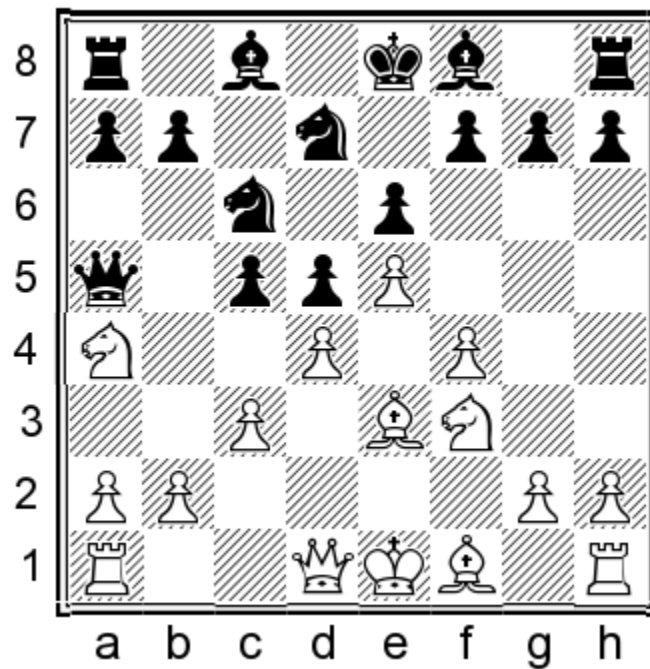


*Position after: 13.c4!²*

maintaining a slight lead in development.

**B)** 8...Qb4+? just blunders a pawn due to 9.c3 Qa5  
10.Nxc5 Bxc5 11.dxc5+- when the c5-pawn is untouchable  
because of the move b2-b4.

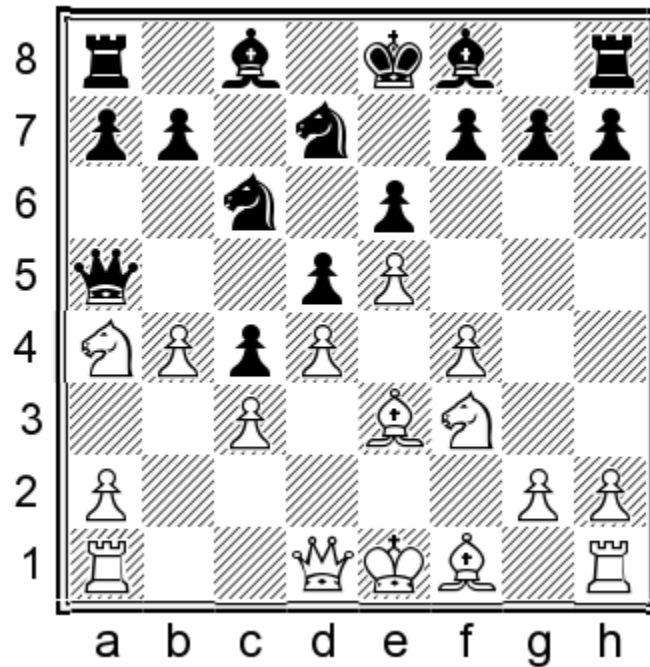
**9.c3**



*Position after: 9.c3*

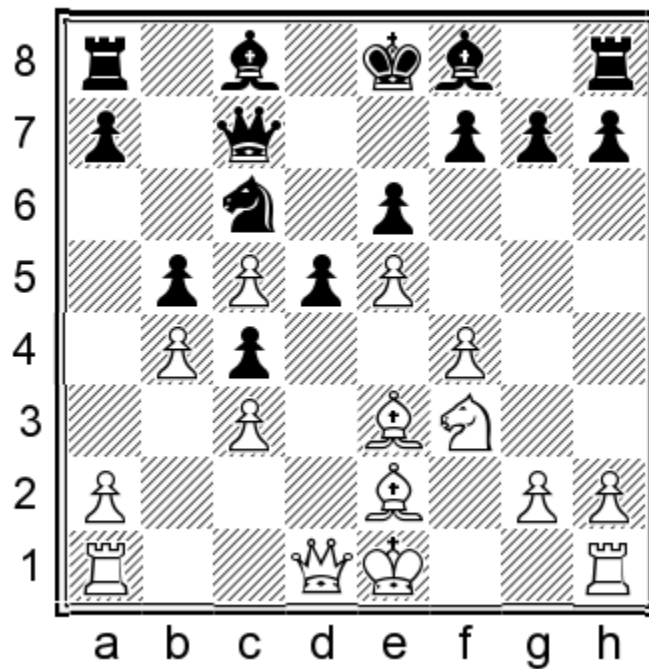
All of Black's ideas here feature a piece sacrifice for a couple of pawns on the b4-square. At classical time controls White has more or less managed to eradicate Black's enthusiasm but it still enjoys some popularity at faster time controls, especially blitz. The most resilient option in terms of both statistics and objective merits is 9...b6

**A) 9...c4 10.b4**



*Position after: 10.b4*

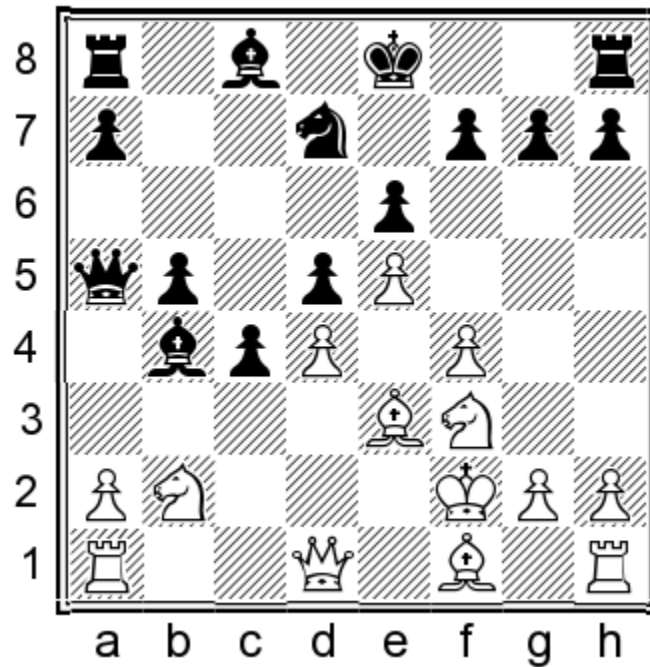
**A1)** 10...Qc7 once again passes all the trumps into White's hand. 11.Be2 b5 [11...Be7 12.0-0 0-0 13.Nc5 Nxc5 14.dxc5 a5 15.a3± is quite similar and the absence of Black's pawn on b5 probably makes things even more favorable for White.] 12.Nc5 Nxc5 13.dxc5!



*Position after: 13.dxc5!*

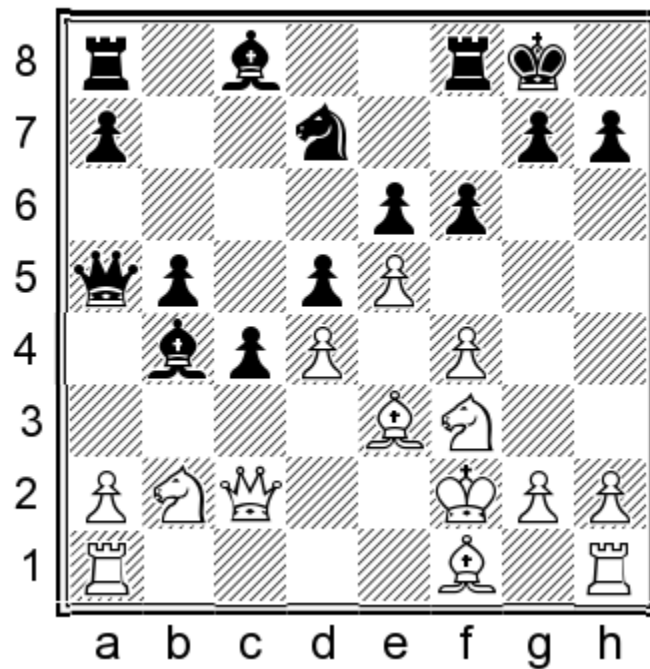
Remember this structure! It is true that capturing “towards the center” is more recommendable as a rule, but here White is securing the great d4-square for their pieces. 13...a5 14.a3 Be7 15.0-0 0-0 16.Nd4 Nxd4 17.Bxd4± Black’s position is remarkably prospectless while White will simply push their kingside pawns as in, for example, Andreikin – Korobov, Hengshui 2009. It is true that Korobov eventually managed to hold in this blitz game but I doubt the renowned French defense specialist will ever repeat this variation in the future.

**A2)** 10...Nxb4 11.cxb4 Bxb4+ 12.Kf2 [This time 12.Bd2?? c3 loses material, so the whole sequence is forced.]  
12...b5 13.Nb2



*Position after: 13.Nb2*

Black's b4-bishop is poorly placed and they have not been able to show much compensation in practical play. 13...0-0 [13...Bc3 14.Qc2 Nb6 15.Rc1 forces Black to either part with their strong bishop or painfully retreat with 15...Bb4 16.Be2±.] 14.Qc2 f6

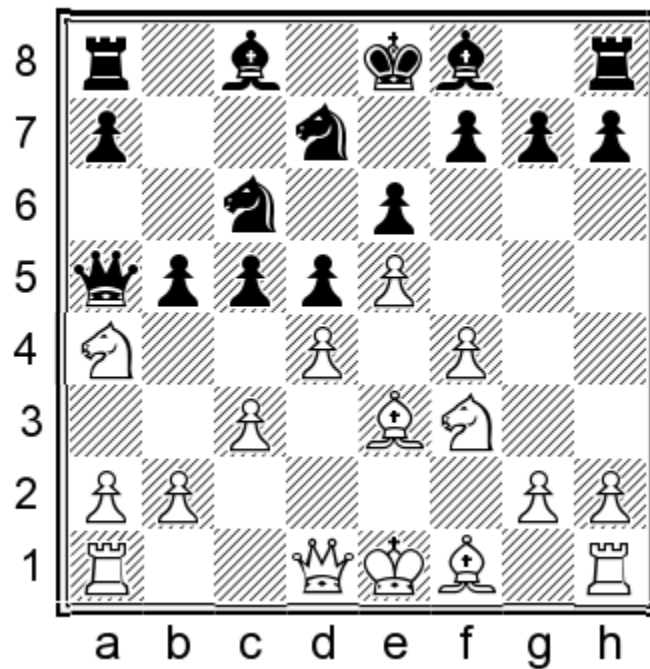


*Position after: 14...f6*

Black's only really dangerous set-up – the idea is to quickly open the position before White manages to consolidate. Black needs to push ...g5 to remove the f4-pawn though, and 15.h4! effectively kills any chance of this. As ...g5 is impossible, White will simply finish their development, e.g. 15...Rb8 16.Kg1 Be7 17.Rh3±.

**B)** If Black doesn't choose to advance their c-pawn, they have little choice of any other independent move. 9...b5?





*Position after: 9...b5?*

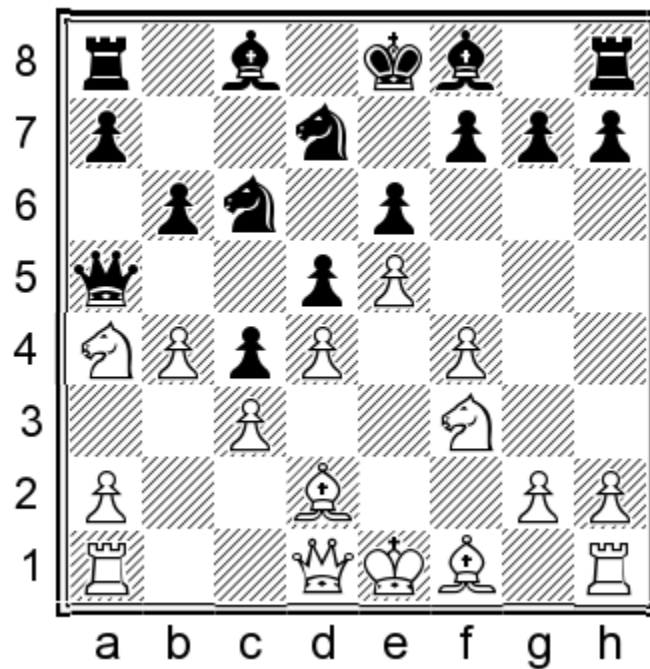
is just plain wrong, and loses material to 10.Nxc5 Nxc5 11.dxc5 b4 12.a3! bxc3 13.b4+-.

**C)** While 9...Nxd4?! 10.Nxd4 cxd4 11.b4 Qc7 12.Bxd4 transposes to the note on Black's 10th move in the 9...cxd4 mainline.

## **10.Bd2!**

A very important move to remember, forcing Black to release the central tension due to the threat of c3-c4.

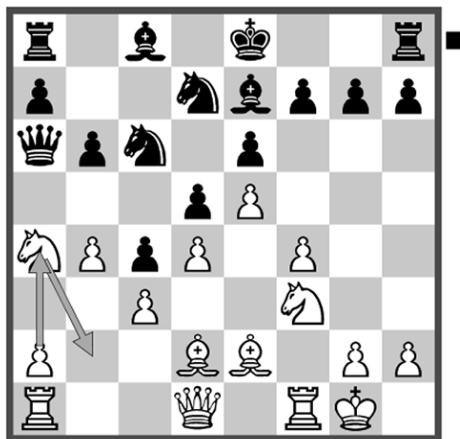
**10...c4™ 11.b4**



*Position after: 11.b4*

## 11...Nxb4

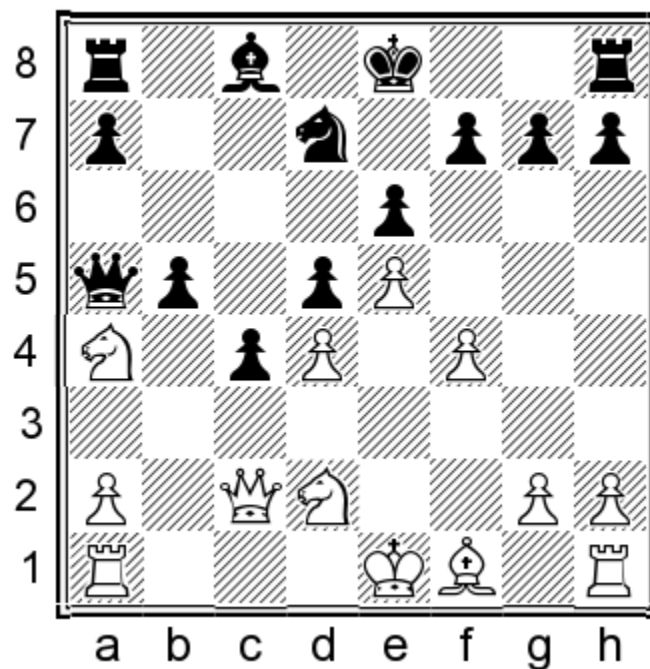
Passivity like 11...Qa6 is not the way to handle this line.  
 Duda has tried it a couple of times in bullet chess against  
 Karjakin but his opening could hardly be called a success.  
 12.Be2 Be7 13.0-0



*Position after: 13.0-0*

The plan is to go Nb2 and push a2-a4, increasing White's already significant spatial advantage. Note that 13...Nf8 14.Nb2 Qa3 does not really impede White's plan as the first player has more than enough resources to push the enemy queen away. 15.Qc2 b5 16.Bc1! Threatening the simple Nxc4, and effectively forcing strategic resignation. 16...Qa6 17.a4± Out of all the possible ...c4 structures, Black has achieved a truly nightmarish one, and has nothing to show for White's absolute dominance.

**12.cxb4 Bxb4 13.Qc2 Bxd2+ 14.Nxd2 b5**

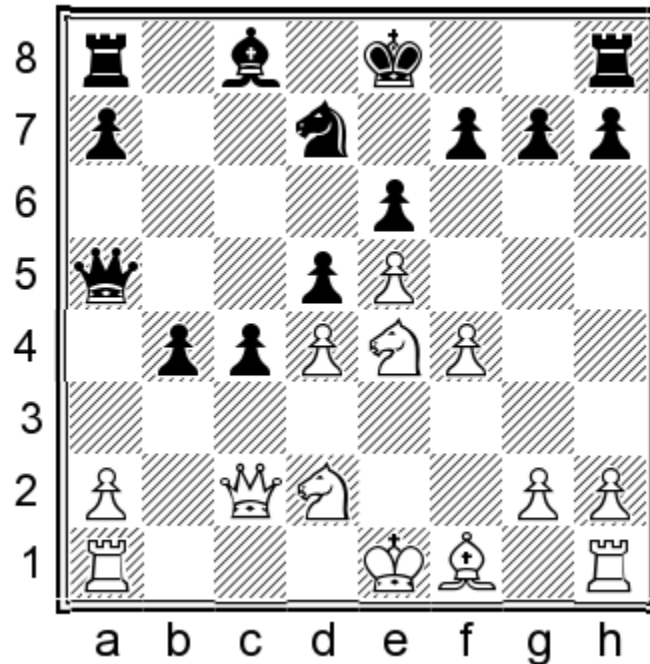


*Position after: 14...b5*

This is the point – now Black's pawns will get going rather quickly, while there is no easy game for White on the kingside as in the 9...cxd4 line.

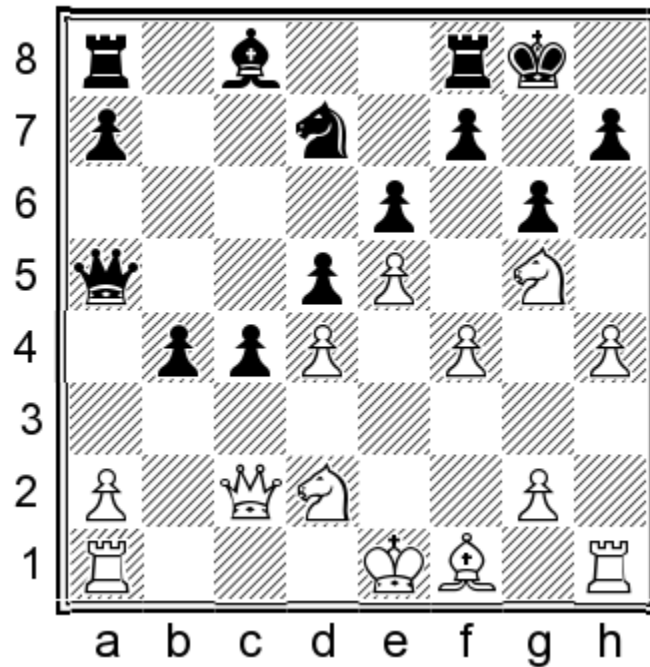
## 15.Nc3 0-0

15...b4 is one square too far as White can initiate a favorable transformation with 16.Nce4!



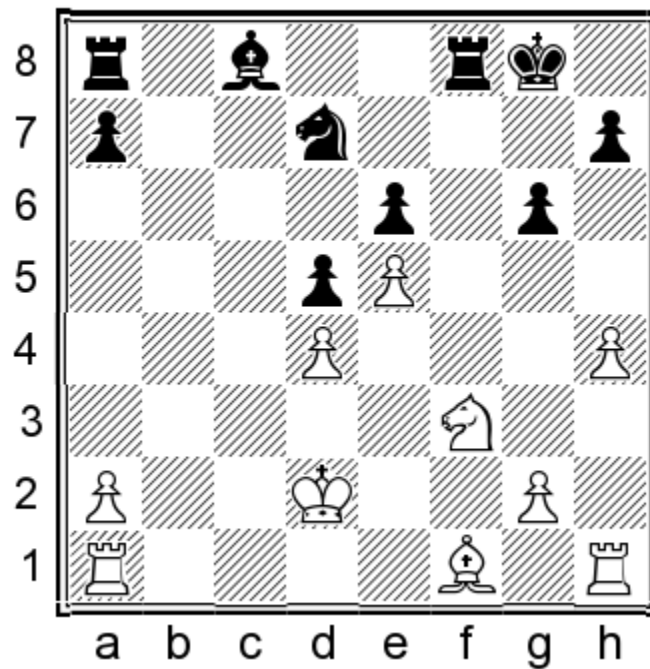
*Position after: 16.Nce4!*

16...0-0 [The prosaic 16...dxe4 17.Nxc4 b3+ 18.Qd2 b2 19.Rb1 Qxd2+ 20.Kxd2<sup>2</sup> will most likely see Black losing both of their weaknesses very soon.] 17.Ng5 g6 18.h4! This is quite an important move which stops Black's counterplay with ...f6. [Instead, if 18.Rb1?! then 18...f6! would muddy the waters. After my recommendation though, Black has nothing better than entering an unfavorable ending once again.]



*Position after: 18.h4!*

18...b3 Otherwise White will just take everything under control with Rb1 and then proceed with the kingside attack, pushing the h-pawn even further. [18...f6?? is now simply losing to 19.Nxh7 Kxh7 20.h5!+- when White just blasts through.] 19.Qc1 b2 20.Qxb2 f6 21.Ngf3 c3 22.Qc1 cxd2+ 23.Qxd2 Qxd2+ 24.Kxd2 fxe5 25.fxe5±



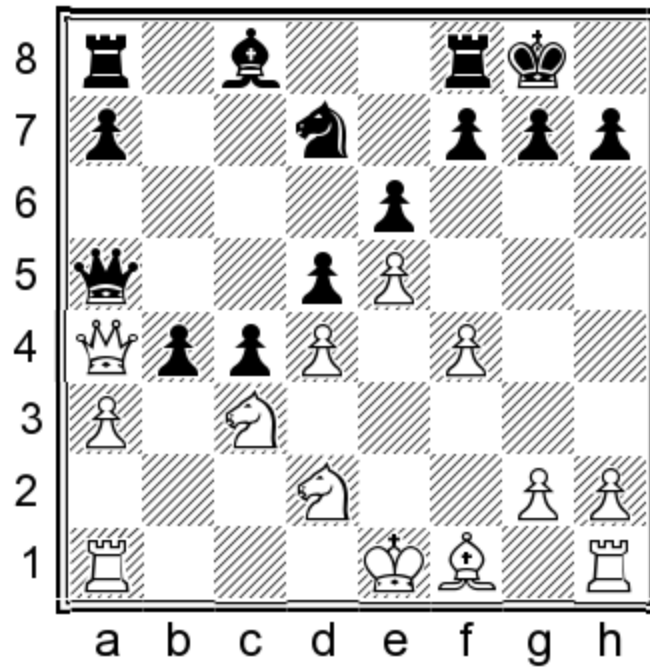
*Position after: 25.fxe5±*

A textbook example of a bad French endgame for Black, with their pieces very passive and White having clear targets on e6 and/or g6.

### **16.a3**

One tempo is all it takes to slow Black down significantly thanks to the following trick...

**16...b4 17.Qa4!**

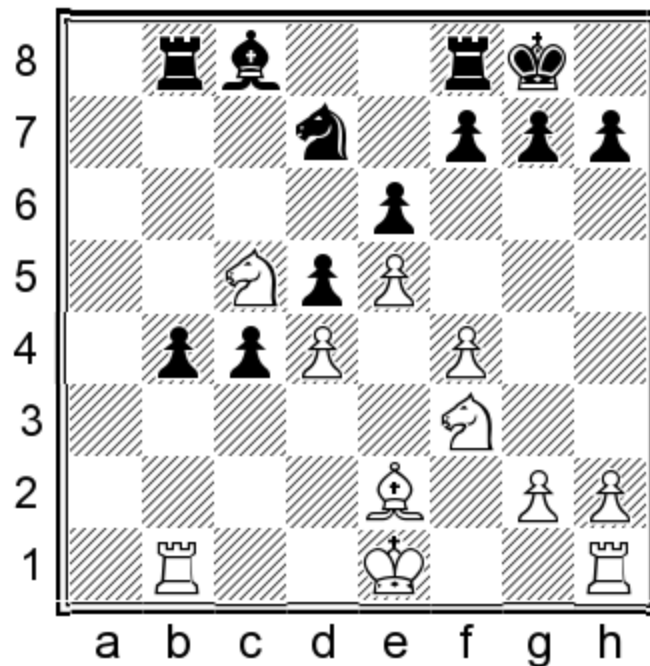


*Position after: 17.Qa4!*

...forcing the queens off the board. One can argue that  
 17...Qxa4 18.Nxa4 a5 19.Rb1 Rb8

still gives Black interesting compensation and although I do not believe there are many French defense fans who would sadistically prepare such a position, we can dig a bit deeper.

**20.Be2 Nb6 21.Nc5 Nd7 22.axb4 axb4 23.Nf3!**



*Position after: 23.Nf3!*

Even after the best computer moves Black remains in grave danger of losing the game, while on the other hand White is getting ready to give up another pawn in exchange for a great blockading square for the knight.

**23...Nxc5 24.dxc5 Bd7 25.Nd4 Rfc8 26.Ra1! b3**

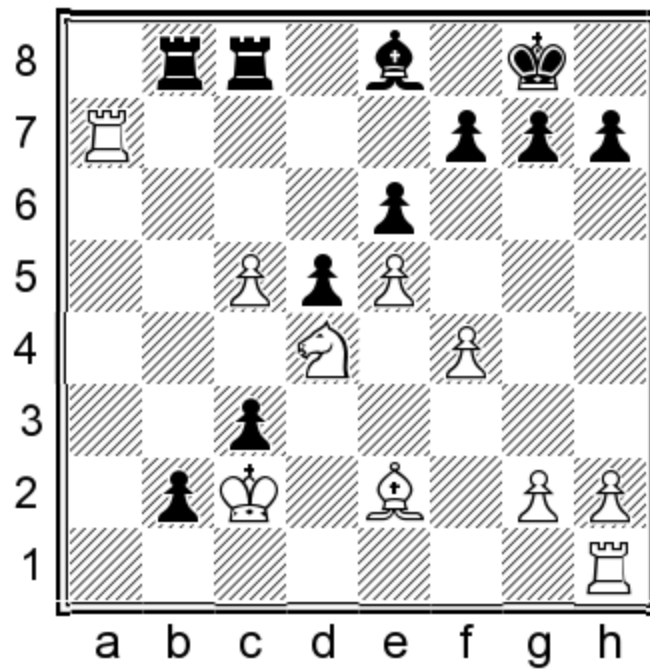
Black cannot get too far with 26...Rxc5 27.Ra7 Be8 28.Kd2±

**27.Ra7! b2 28.Kd2 c3+**

White is just in time to stop the pawns as 28...b1=Q 29.Rxb1 Rxb1 30.Rxd7+- is simply winning for them thanks to the c5-pawn being taboo.

**29.Kc2 Be8**





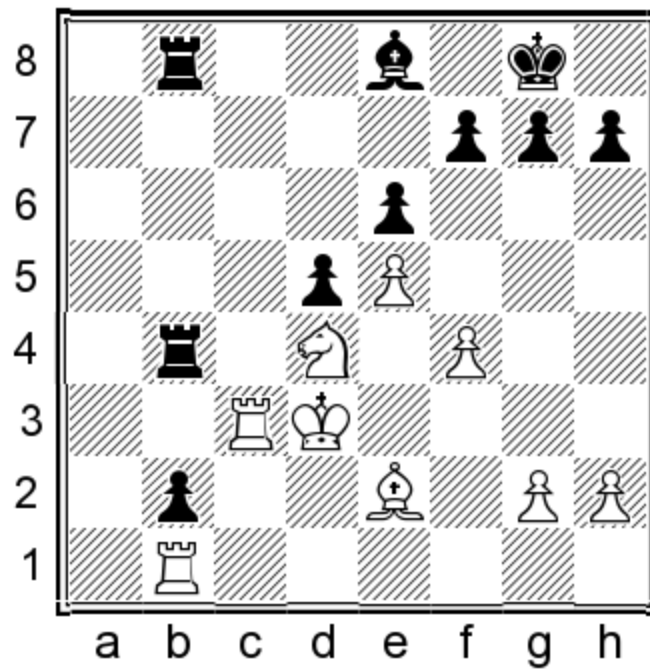
*Position after: 29...Be8*

As Black is threatening to play ...f6 and ...Bg6, a small tactical solution is once again being called for.

**30.c6! Bxc6 31.Rb1**

Do not err with 31.Ra3? Bd7! 32.Rb1 Rb4 33.Rxc3 Rxd4! when the c8-rook is, unexpectedly, protected.

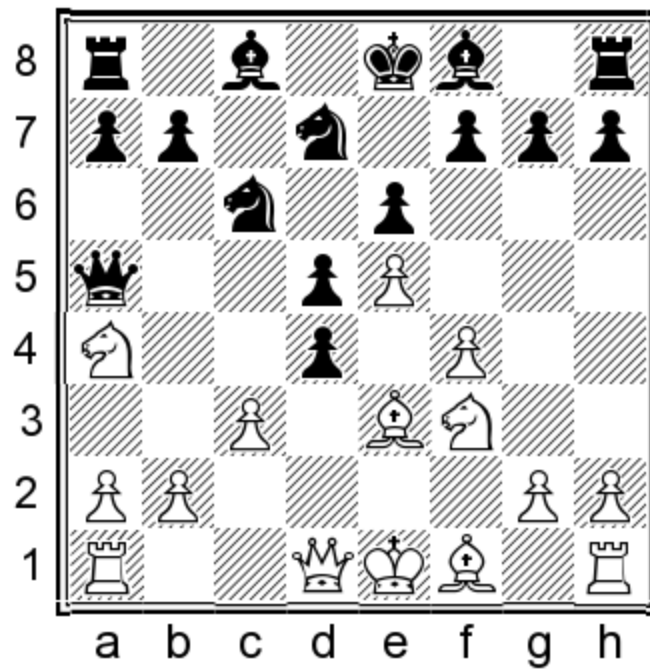
**31...Be8 32.Ra3 Rb4 33.Rxc3 Rcb8 34.Kd3±**



*Position after: 34.Kd3±*

**d) 7...Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 cxd4 & 13...--**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 cxd4**

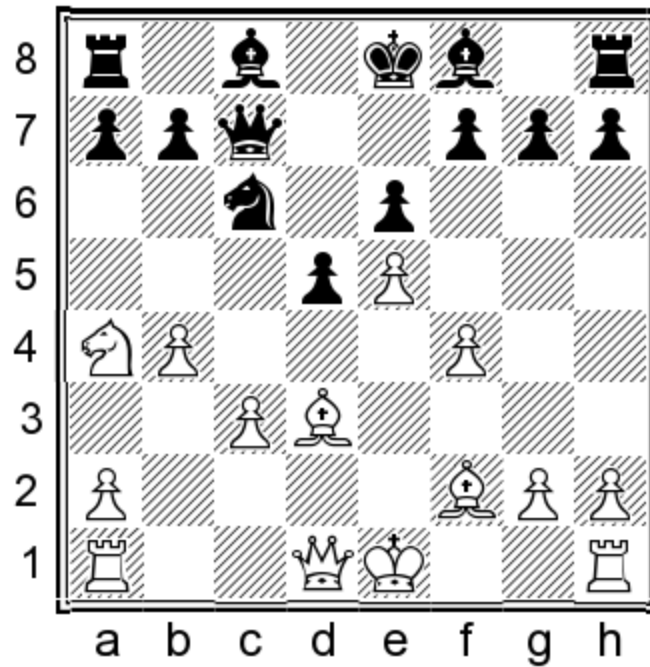


*Position after: 9...cxd4*

This is the most frequently played continuation. At the same time it has been analyzed if not until a checkmate, then at least until White achieves a decisive advantage.

### **10.b4 Nxb4**

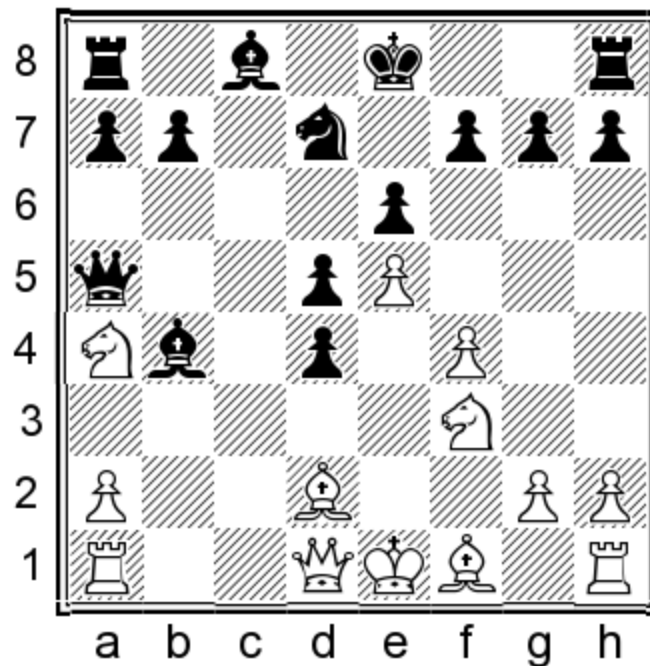
10...Qc7?! gives White a very easy game after 11.Nxd4 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 Nb8 13.Bd3 Nc6 14.Bf2



*Position after: 14.Bf2*

as already shown by Anand in a simul game against Bonnaire in 1994. If the second player does not do anything special, White will simply castle and prepare c3-c4 with a3 & Rc1. But even Bonnaire's 14...g5 15.b5 Na5 16.0-0± could not change much – White is simply much better.

**11.cxb4 Bxb4+ 12.Bd2**



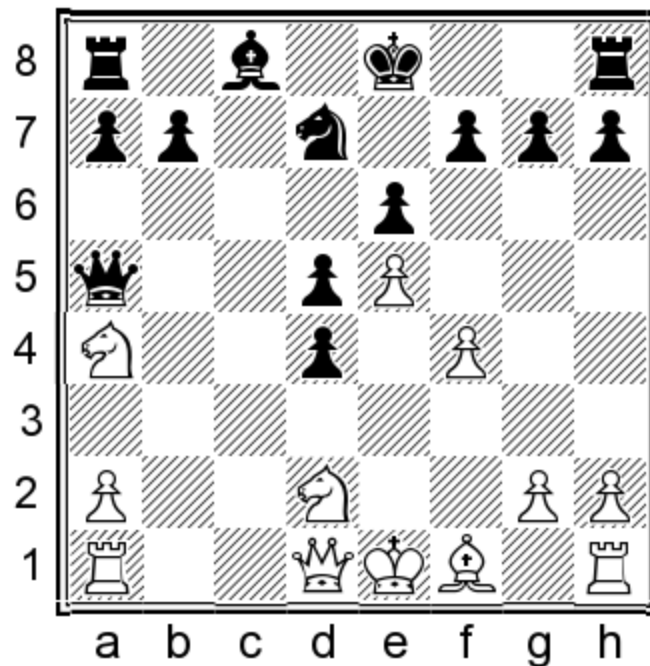
*Position after: 12.Bd2*

This has been the subject of theoretical discussions for many years but nowadays the path to White's advantage is well known.

### **12...Bxd2+**

12...0-0?!, besides having no real independent value if White puts their bishop on d3, is imprecise in view of 13.Nb2! when White will recapture on d2 with the queen. Note the 13...Bc3 14.Nxd4!+- trick.

### **13.Nxd2**



*Position after: 13.Nxd2*

Black has tried multiple options but objectively their compensation is very far from being sufficient.

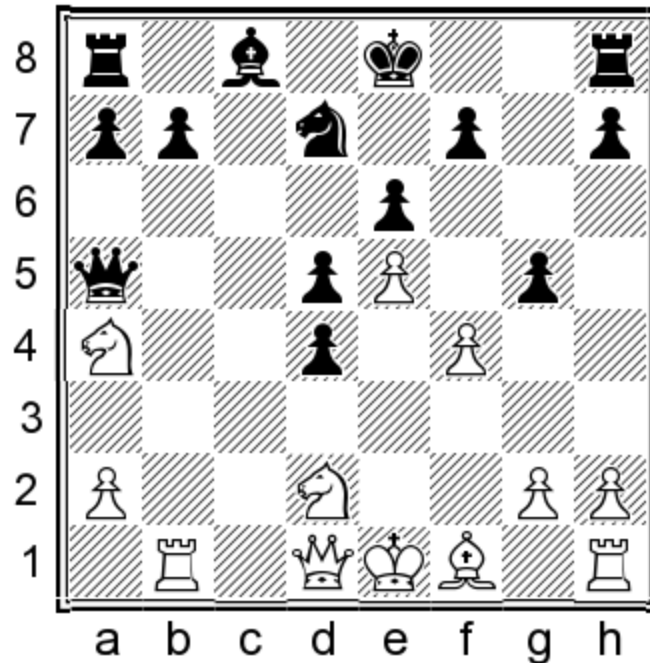
### **13...b6**

has been scoring the best, possibly because White needs some fine maneuvering to untangle his position. Nevertheless, with a bit of precision you should be able to overcome this option easily.

**A)** Let's start with a loose end, 13...f6 14.Bd3! 0-0 [14...fxe5? 15.Qh5+ g6 16.Bxg6++-] 15.exf6 transposes to 13...0-0.

**B)** 13...g5? 14.Rb1! is a motif worth remembering. Thanks to the positional threat of Bb5 White gains a useful consolidating tempo. [It is possible to play 14.Nb2 first as well and keep some edge, but the rook move is simply

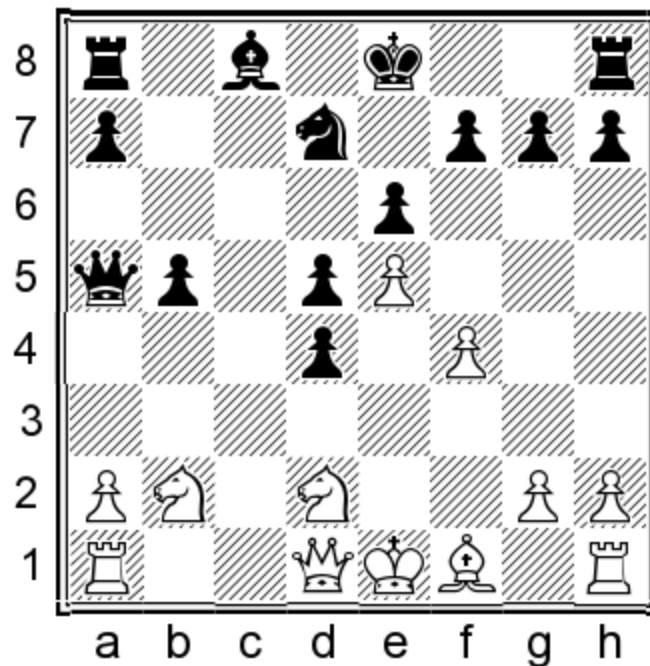
much more precise. After 14...gxf4 15.Nd3 b6 with the intention of ...Ba6 White could face some practical issues.]



*Position after: 14.Rb1!*

14...a6 [After 14...gxf4 15.Bb5+–, with castling short to follow, Black is completely stuck, as in Short – Timman, Amsterdam 1994.] 15.Nb2 Here the ...b6, ...Ba6 set-up is obviously impossible which is another big plus for White. 15...Nc5 16.Bd3+– White will finish their development comfortably and then proceed with destroying Black's already significantly weakened position. Black is welcome to take the a2-pawn, which is not important for White at all.

**C)** 13...b5 works worse than its slightly more humble cousin 13...b6 as the c8-bishop is uncomfortably stuck. 14.Nb2



*Position after: 14.Nb2*

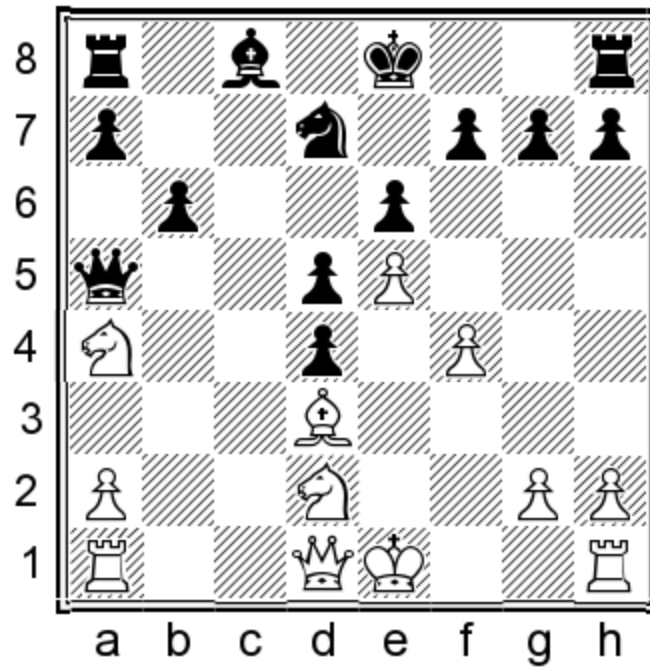
**C1)** It would be nice if Black managed to maneuver their knight to c4 but 14...Nb6 is too slow due to 15.a4!±.

**C2)** 14...0-0 might transpose into 13...0-0 if White develops their bishop to d3 but 15.Be2!f is even stronger here, simply finishing development by castling short.

**C3)** 14...Nc5 15.Nd3 Ne4 16.a4! Again Black's control is undermined. 16...Nc3 [16...b4 17.Nb3+-] 17.Nb3!± – the key move. After the subsequent Qc2 it will not take long before Black's d4-pawn falls and their position starts collapsing.

**14.Bd3**

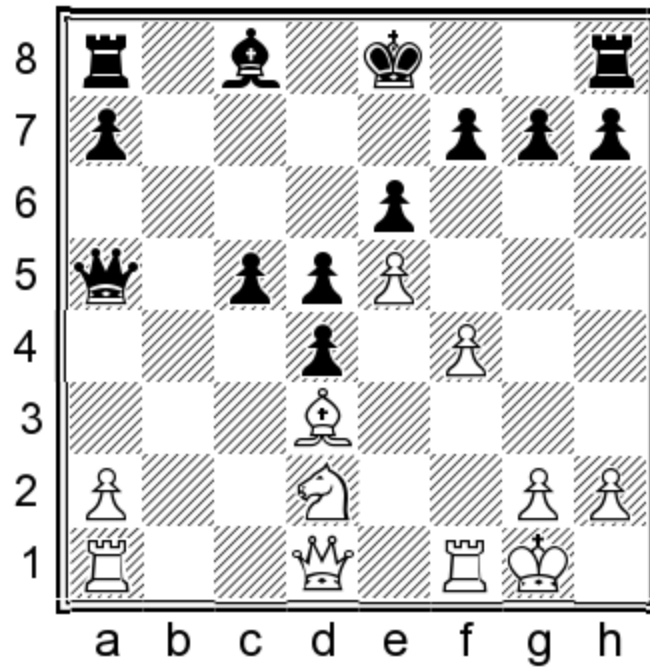




*Position after: 14.Bd3*

### **14...Ba6**

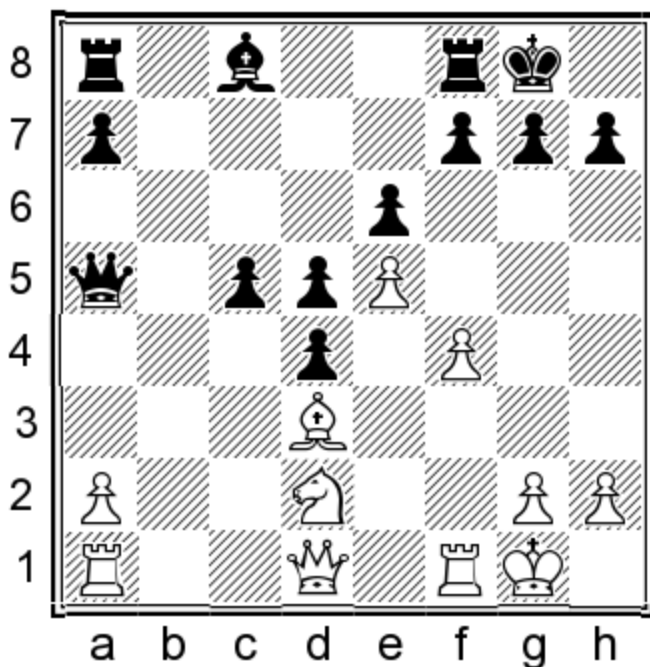
14...Nc5 15.Nxc5 bxc5 16.0-0 bears some similarities with the text main line and if Black castles, we might indeed find an intersection with the 13...0-0 variation.



*Position after: 16.0-0*

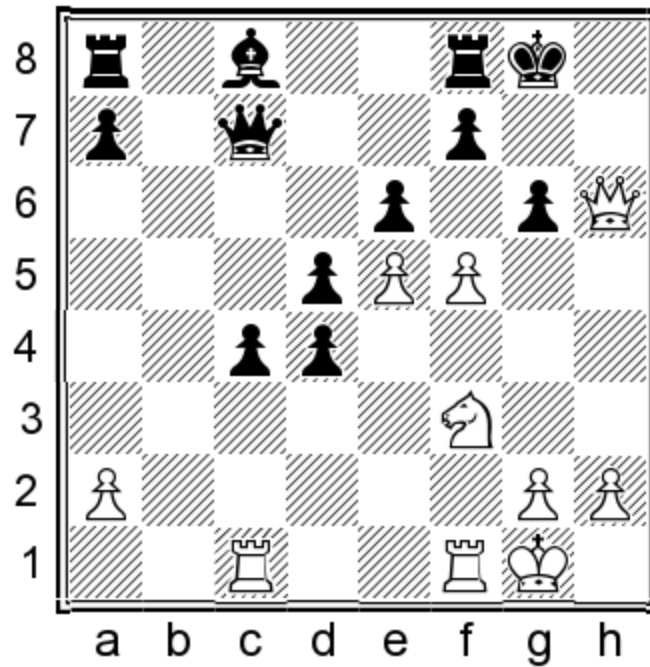
**A)** 16...Bd7 17.Rb1 Rc8 [17...c4 18.Bxc4!] 18.Rb7 Bc6  
 19.Nb3 Qxa2 20.Rxf7 Kxf7 21.f5 Rhf8 22.Qh5+ Ke7  
 23.Qxh7+- **B)** Black should refrain from playing 16...0-0

which is problematic due to many moves, most notably



*Position after: 16...0-0*

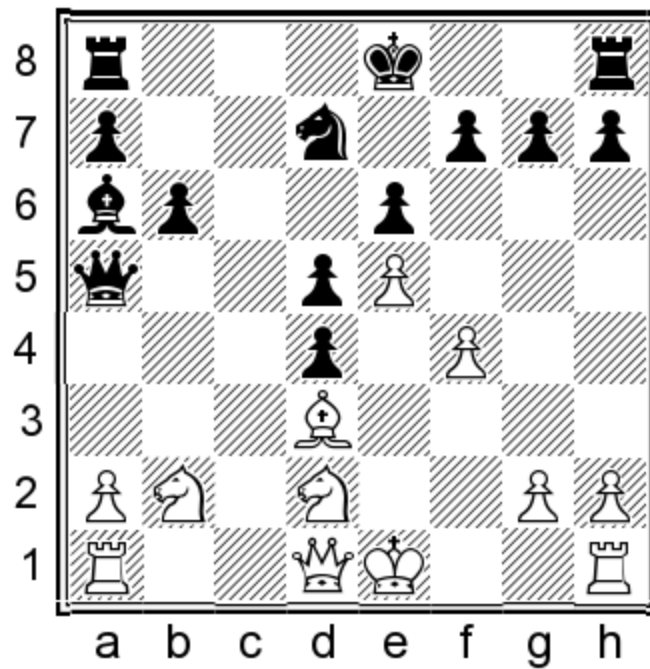
17.Rc1!, threatening Qc2 and luring Black's c-pawn forward, thus weakening the d4-square and nullifying ...Ba6 in some variations too. [For comparison, 17.Bxh7+ is not so strong yet due to 17...Kxh7 18.Qh5+ Kg8 19.Nf3 g6 20.Qh6 Qc7 21.f5 f6 22.fxg6 Qg7 23.Qh4 Ba6! which is a completely different story, as Black's pawn is still on c5.] 17...c4 18.Bxh7+! This is now winning by force. 18...Kxh7 19.Qh5+ Kg8 20.Nf3 g6 21.Qh6 Qc7 22.f5!! Black is being ripped to shreds.



*Position after: 22.f5!!*

22...f6 [22...exf5 23.Rce1! is a position White might reach via the 13...0-0 move order below. White threatens the killing Ng5 and if 23...Ba6, then 24.e6 Rae8 25.Ng5 fxe6 26.Rxe6 Rxe6 27.Nxe6+- finishes the job.] 23.fxg6 Qg7 24.Qh4+- In the period of 2016 – 2018 White won four model correspondence games (out of four!) from this strategically dominant position. White is controlling the dark squares, and threatening to capture either on d4, or on f6 and then play Ne5.

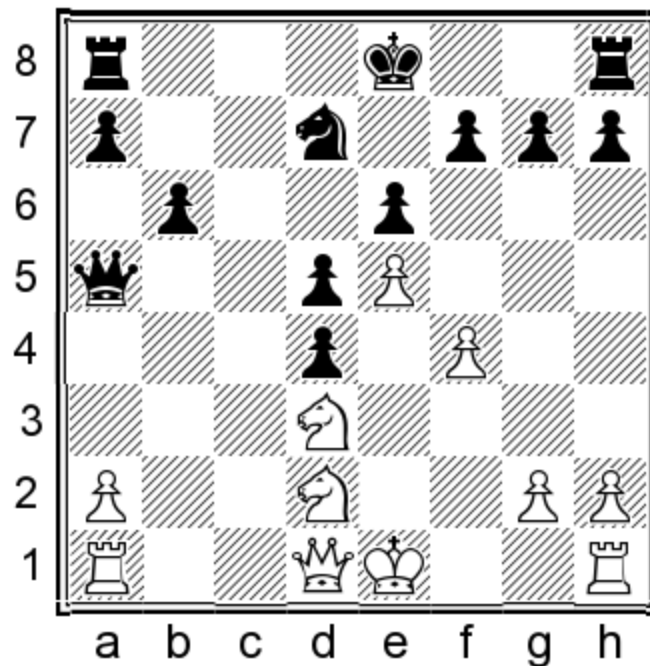
**15.Nb2!**



*Position after: 15.Nb2!*

### **15...Nc5**

White might need to make an awkward move or two to protect their unstable pieces but on closer look it turns out they will regain their coordination soon, for example  
 15...Bxd3 16.Nxd3



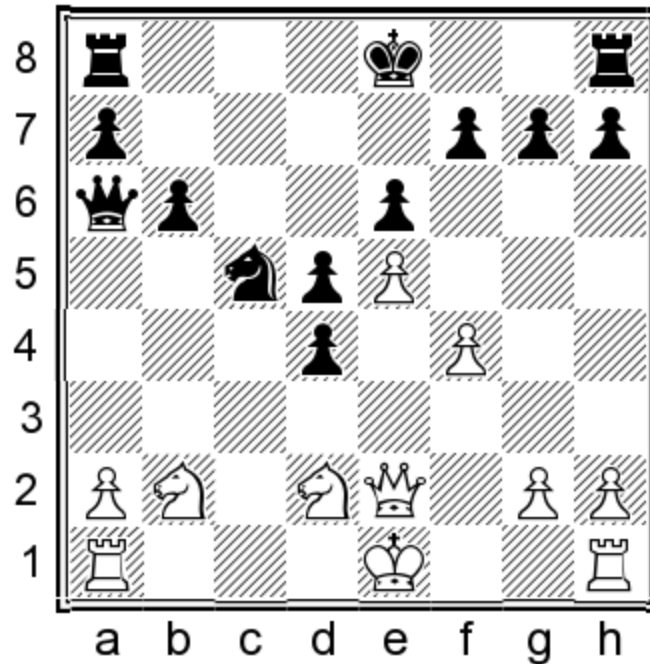
*Position after: 16.Nxd3*

**A)** 16...Qc3 17.Ke2! is one of such moments. But if you realize Black's queen will be pushed away soon and there is no way to threaten the centralized white king, things start looking up again, e.g. 17...0-0 18.Nb3 Qc4 19.Rc1 Qa6 20.Rc7 Qxa2+ 21.Qc2± with tremendous winning chances for White.

**B)** 16...Nc5 17.Nf2! Na4 18.0-0 In Timman - Kortschnoj, Brussels 1987, White successfully finished his development and proceeded to unleash hell on Black's monarch in textbook fashion after 18...Nc3 19.Qg4 0-0 20.Nf3 Rac8 21.f5!+-.

**16.Bxa6 Qxa6 17.Qe2**

I suggest you study these lines carefully as it could be quite



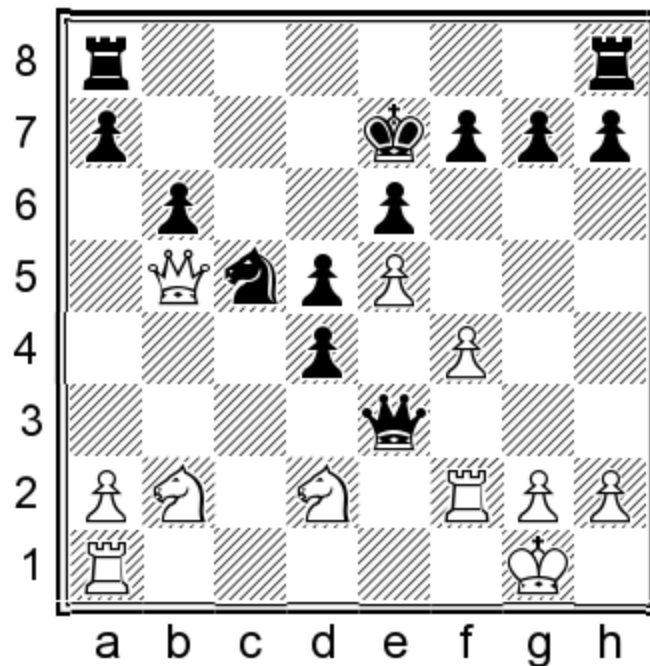
unpleasant to face

*Position after: 17.Qe2*

them over the board without being familiar with the unusual but strong maneuvers that White has at their disposal.

### **17...Qa3**

17...d3 18.Qe3 Qa3 19.Nd1! brings an end to Black's initiative. 19...Na6 20.0-0+- 18.Qb5+! Ke7 19.0-0 Qe3+ 20.Rf2



*Position after: 20.Rf2*

Were it not for the queen check on b5 and Rf2, Black's counterplay would start looking dangerous and White could get into problems.

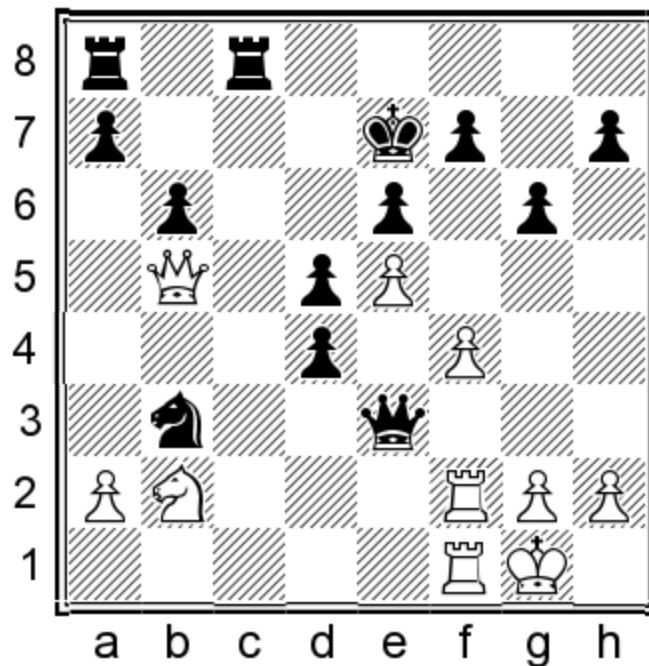
But after showing the necessary precision the fruits of their labor will be extra sweet.

**20...Rhc8 21.Raf1 g6**

21...f5 22.exf6+ gxf6 23.Nd1 Qd3 24.Qb2! White had no desire to play an endgame and instead went on to crush his opponent in the middlegame in Kamsky - Kraai, Foxwoods 2007, after 24...Nd7 25.Nf3+-.

**22.Nb3 Nxb3**





*Position after: 22...Nxb3*

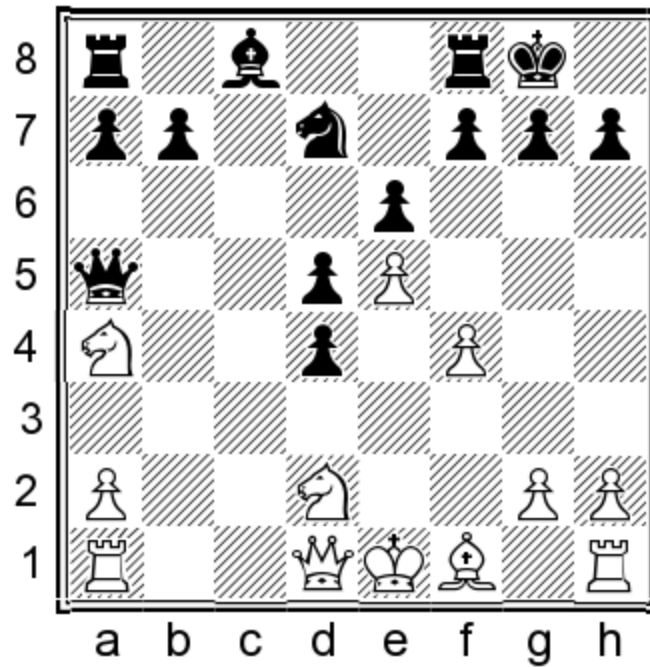
Both engine and practical experience suggest White is winning. In Zhigalko – Podolchenko, Minsk 2011, the first player first cleverly wiggled out of the e3-g1 pin with 23.Nd1 Qe4 24.Re2 Qb1

And after

**25.Qb4+ Ke8 26.axb3+- he went on to win convincingly.**

**e) 7...Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 cxd4 & 13...0-0**

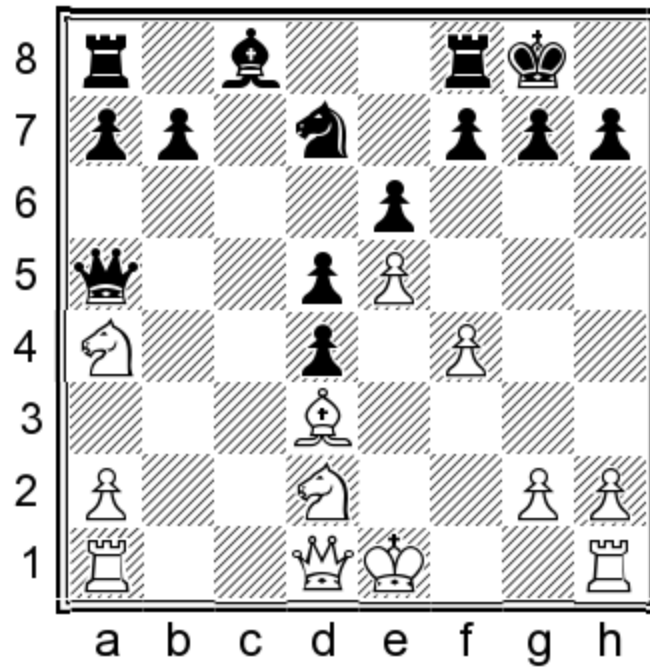
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 Qb6 8.Na4 Qa5+ 9.c3 cxd4 10.b4 Nxb4 11.cxb4 Bxb4+ 12.Bd2 Bxd2+ 13.Nxd2 0-0**



*Position after: 13...0-0*

### **14.Bd3**

If White tried to start with 14.Be2?, then they would be immediately worse after 14...d3! 15.Bxd3 Qb4!µ, when they cannot castle due to the check on d4 and Black is threatening to play both ...b5 and ...Qxf4.

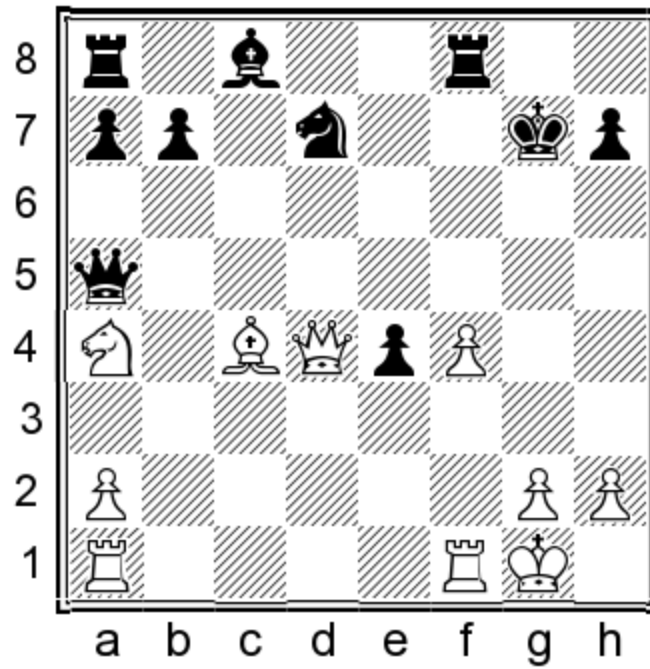


*Position after: 14.Bd3*

### **14...b5**

14...f6 15.exf6 is insufficient, and White will castle on the next move.

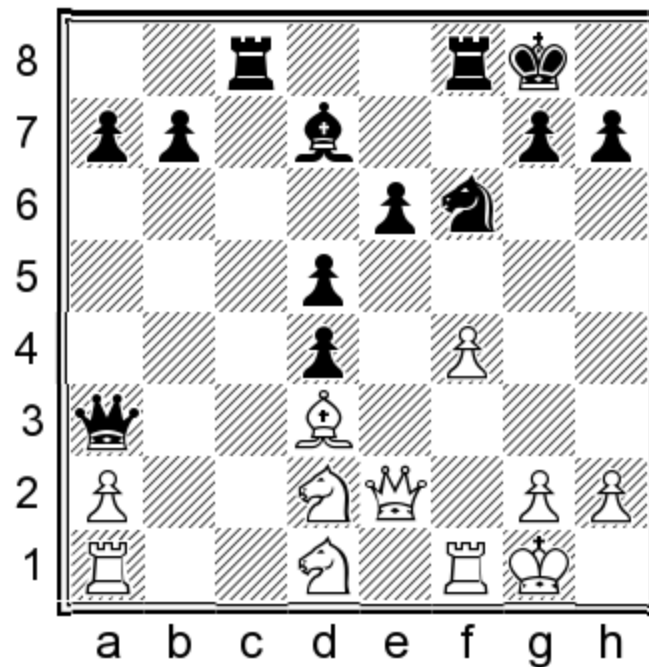
**A)** 15...e5 fails to turn the tide as long as you remember you should counter it with 16.0-0! e4 17.Nxe4! dxe4 18.Bc4+ Kh8 19.fxg7+ Kxg7 20.Qxd4+



*Position after: 20.Qxd4+*

with a healthy extra pawn. There is also a fine tactical point ahead – 20...Nf6 21.Qe5! with the idea of 21...Qxa4? 22.Qe7++-.

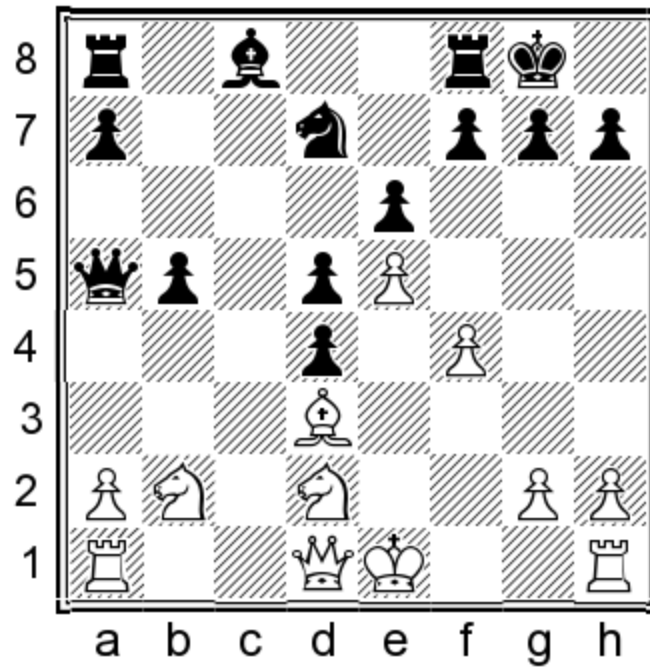
**B)** 15...Nxf6 16.0-0 Bd7 17.Nb2 Rac8 18.Qe2 Qa3



19.Nd1!+-

*Position after: 19.Nd1!+- This should already be a familiar maneuver. The knight is on the lookout for greener pastures on f2. White has consolidated successfully and the rest should be a matter of technique.*

**15.Nb2**



*Position after: 15.Nb2*

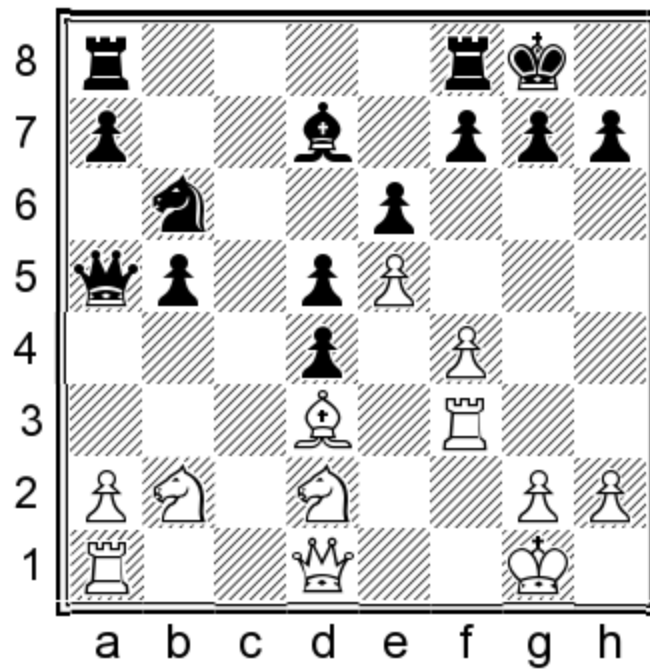
### **15...Nb6**

The only way to throw at least some obstacles into White's path and to make them show some knowledge is to put the knight on c4.

Other moves like 15...Qa3 16.Qb1±, 15...Nc5 16.0-0±, or 15...Qc3 16.Rb1 Nc5 17.Qe2± make it too simple for White.

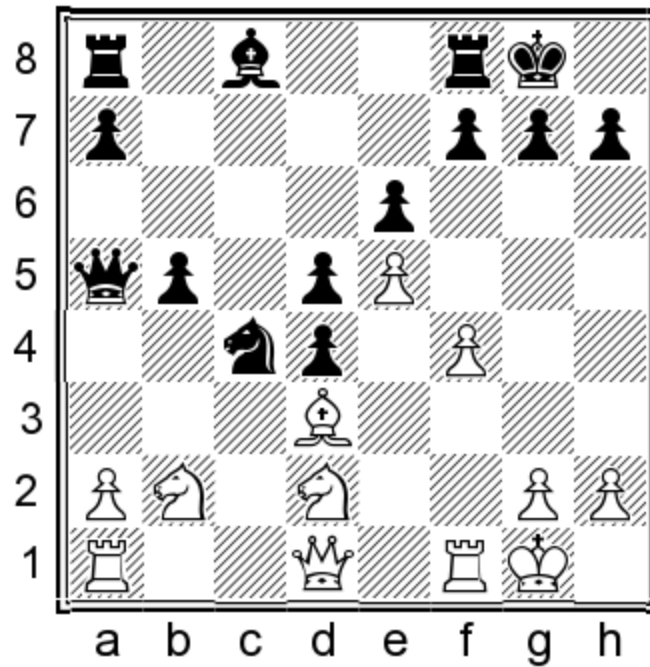
### **16.0-0 Nc4**

16...Bd7 is useless as White continues the onslaught with 17.Rf3!, already threatening to unleash the typical Bxh7+ sacrifice.



*Position after: 17.Rf3*

After 17...g6 18.Nb3 Qa3 19.Qe2 their attack will continue rolling on, e.g. 19...Nc4 20.Nd1 a5 21.Qf2+- with the intention of Qh4 and Rh3 (or Nd1-f2-g4).



*Position after: 16...Nc4*

### **17.Nbxc4!**

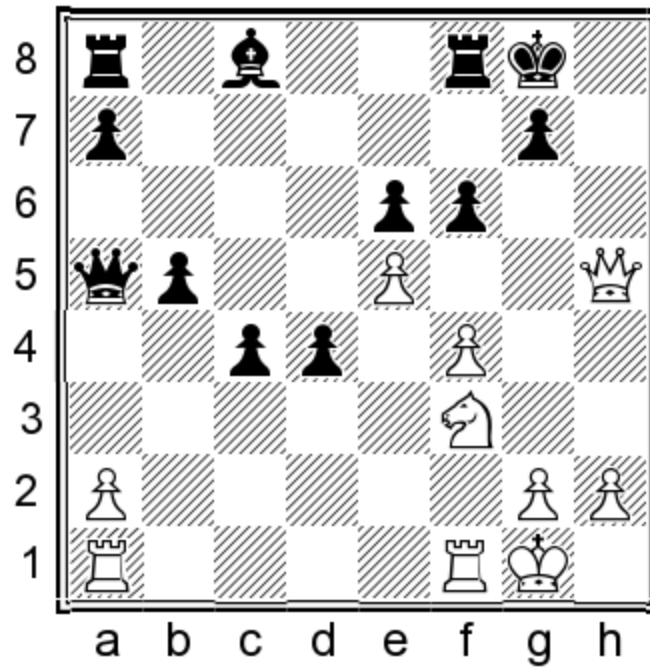
White needs to prepare the classical Bxh7+ sacrifice correctly. The first step is to clarify the situation in the center.

17.Bxh7+ Kxh7 18.Qh5+ Kg8

**A)** 19.Nbxc4! is possible too and will transpose.

**B)** However deferring the knight exchange even further with 19.Nf3 could prove a bit troublesome after 19...f6 20.Nxc4 dxc4! when things are suddenly not so easy at all.



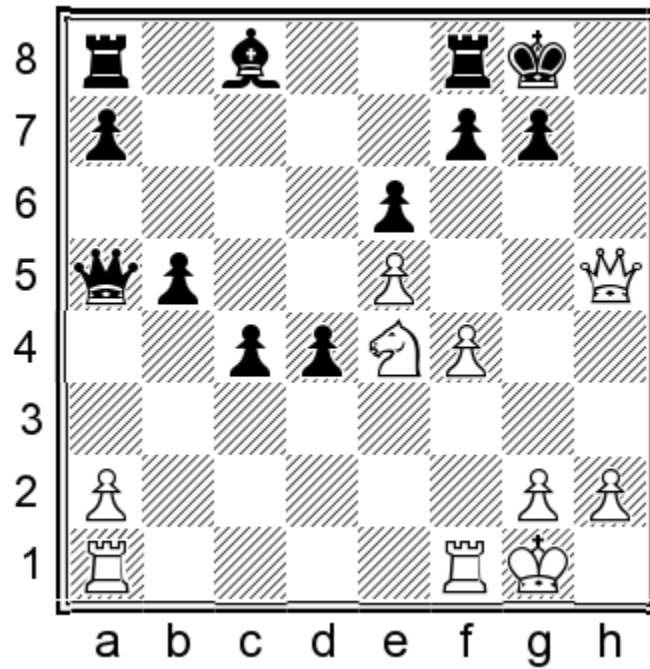


*Position after: 20...dxc4!*

Therefore it is best to remember to capture on c4 immediately. One of the issues is that after 21.exf6 Qc7 22.fxg7 Qxg7 23.Ne5 Bb7,, the b7-bishop is extremely active. If we were able to magically move the b5-pawn to d5 though, the evaluation would change dramatically.

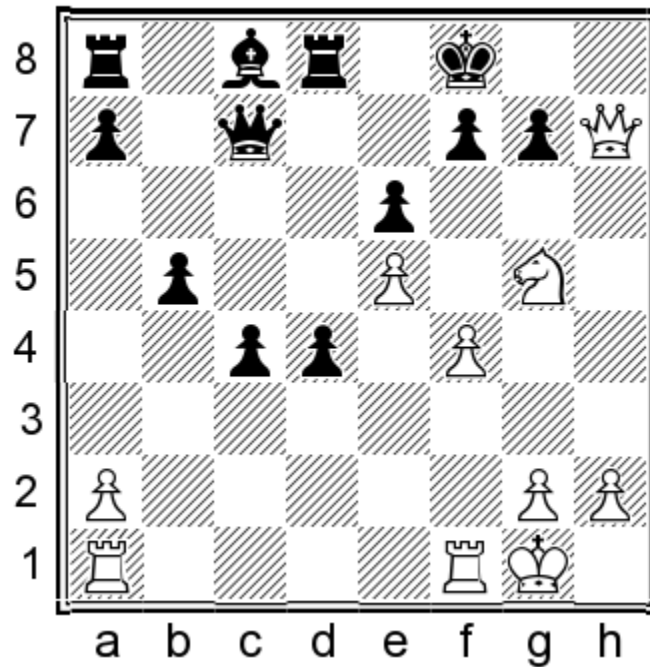
### **17...bxc4**

17...dxc4 loses control over the e4-square and 18.Bxh7+! Kxh7 19.Qh5+ is now even more effective thanks to the possibility of 19...Kg8 20.Ne4!.



*Position after: 20.Ne4!*

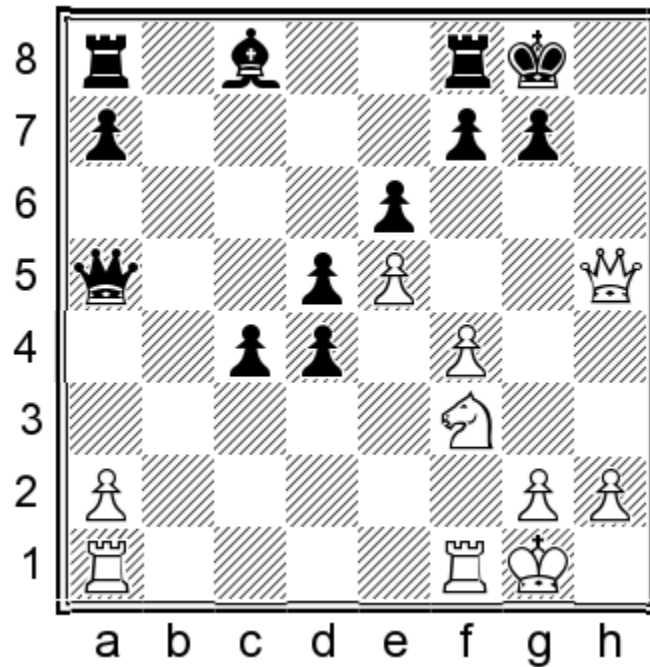
Black's position is on the verge of collapse and even after the best defense, 20...Rd8 [20...f6 21.Nxf6+!+- forced immediate resignation in Secer - Gurcan, Konya 2010.] 21.Ng5 Qc7 White blasts through with 22.Qh7+ Kf8



*Position after: 22...Kf8*

23.f5! [It is true that 23.Qh8+?! Ke7 24.Qxg7 Rf8 25.f5 can be played too but here Black is not obliged to capture the f5 pawn, giving them some additional defensive options.]  
 23...exf5 24.Qh8+ Ke7 25.Qxg7 Rf8 26.e6! (this was the point behind White's 23rd move) 26...Bxe6 27.Rae1+-.

**18.Bxh7+! Kxh7 19.Qh5+ Kg8 20.Nf3**

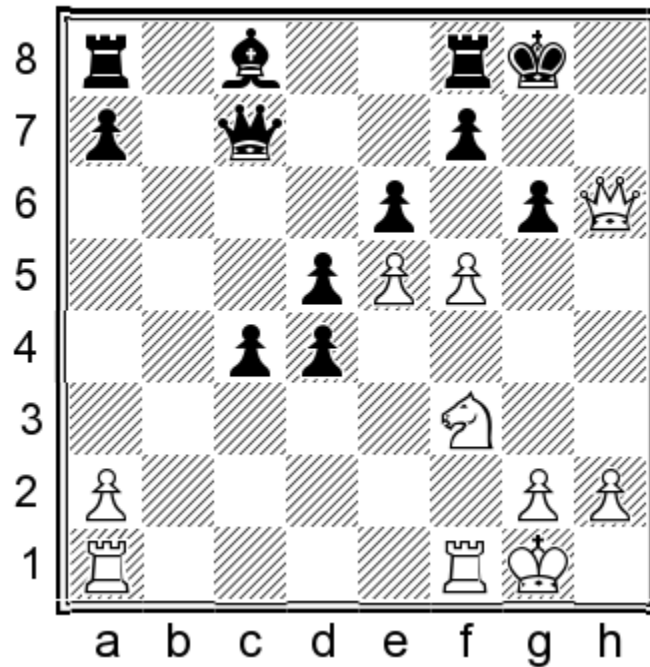


*Position after: 20.Nf3*

As already noted above, it is important that we force Black to commit with ...bxc4 because the presence of the d5-pawn is quite important for White here.

## **20...f6**

You may remember the key motif 20...g6 21.Qh6 Qc7 22.f5!!, from the 13...b6 line.

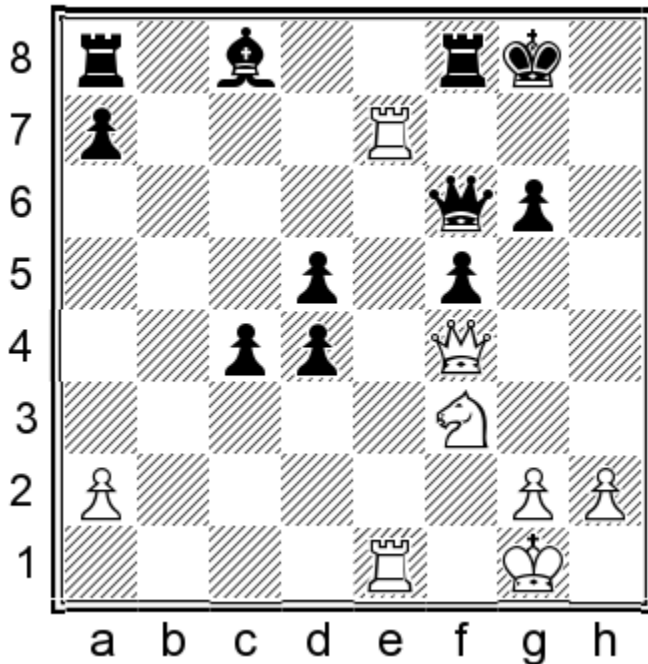


*Position after: 22.f5!!*

**A)** 22...gxf5 makes 23.Ng5! the decisive move as after 23...f6 24.exf6+- the f6-pawn is protected by White's queen.

**B)** 22...exf5 23.Rae1! is a transposition to the line starting with 13...b6. Let me just add that 23...f6 loses to 24.exf6

Qh7 25.Qf4 Qf7 26.Re7 Qxf6 27.Rfe1+-

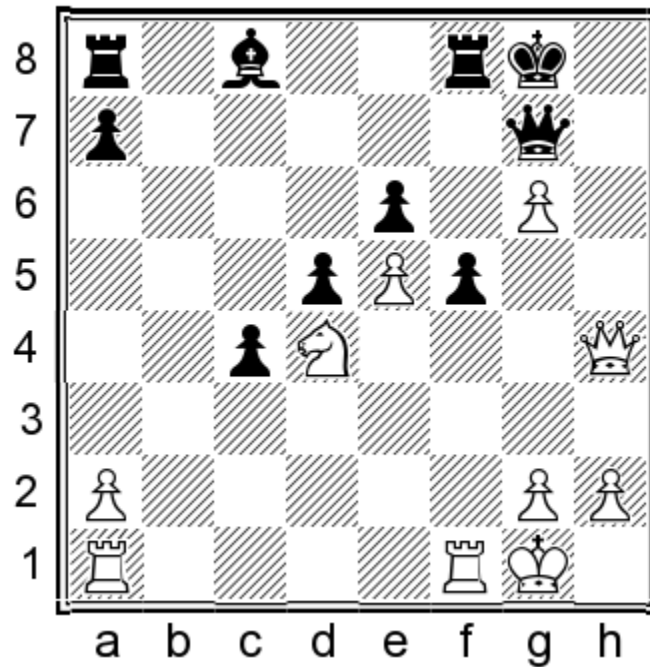


*Position after: 27.Rfe1+- This position, reached in as many as 23 games, marked the downfall of the whole line as White managed to score a stunning 95% from here.*

**C) 22...f6 23.fxg6**

**C1) 23...Qg7** sees White get the dark-squared bind again after 24.Qh4 Qh8 [24...f5 25.Nxd4 transposes] 25.Qxd4±.

**C2) 23...f5 24.Nxd4 Qg7 25.Qh4!** Besides the Nxc4 and the Bxh7+ motifs, this is the third fact you should remember while playing this line: White's queen belongs on h4. White scores almost 100% from such positions and no wonder – Black is completely helpless against White's strategic dominance.



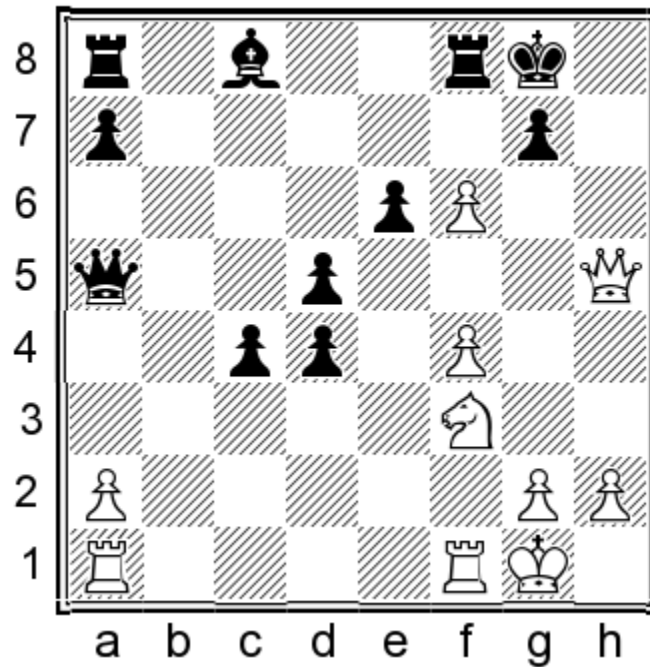
*Position after: 25.Qh4!*

**C2.1)** White will build up with natural attacking moves like Rf3 and they also have the Nd4-e2-f4-h5 maneuver in stock, e.g. 25...Bd7 26.Rf3! Rfb8 27.Ne2 Rb7 28.Nf4+-.

**C2.2)** Do not forget it would be a shame to exchange queens having such a powerful attacking position, therefore 25...Qh8 should be met with 26.Qf4! Qh5 27.Rf3, and 27...Qg4 with 28.Qd2!+-.

**C2.3)** 25...Rb8 26.Rf3 Rb7 27.Re1!+- Black was already threatening to capture the e5-pawn since their rook is protecting them from Qh7 mate. But after White stops their only threat, there is no cure for Rh3 followed by Qg5 and Rh7.

**21.exf6**

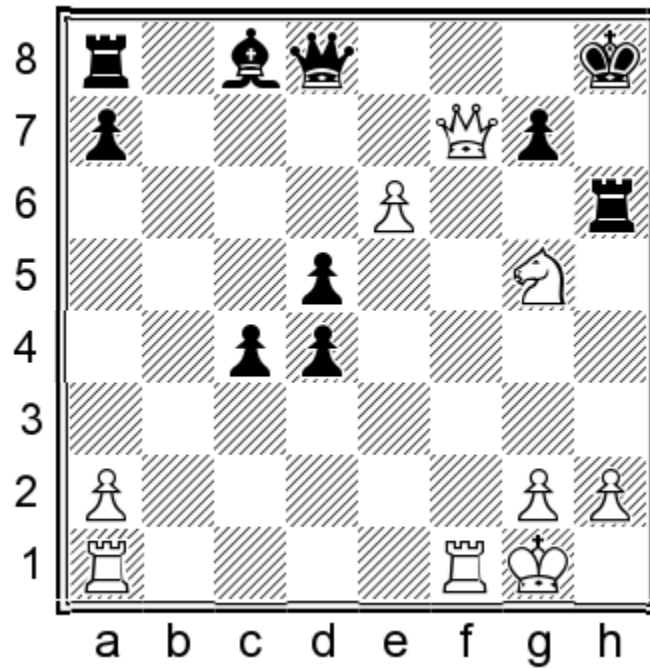


*Position after: 21.exf6*

## **21...Qc7**

There is one last tactical nuance you should really be aware of – after 21...Rxf6 22.Ng5 Qd8, then 23.f5! is necessary to successfully breach Black's defensive lines. [The problem with the natural 23.Qh7+ Kf8 24.Qh8+ Ke7 25.Qxg7+ Kd6 26.Nh7 is that Black can hope to muddy the waters with 26...Rf5 27.g4 Qd7! and the ensuing rook-down endgame is anything but clear thanks to Black's strong passers. 28.Qxd7+ Bxd7 29.gxf5 exf5 30.Ng5 d3∞] 23...Rh6 24.Qf7+ Kh8 25.fxe6!

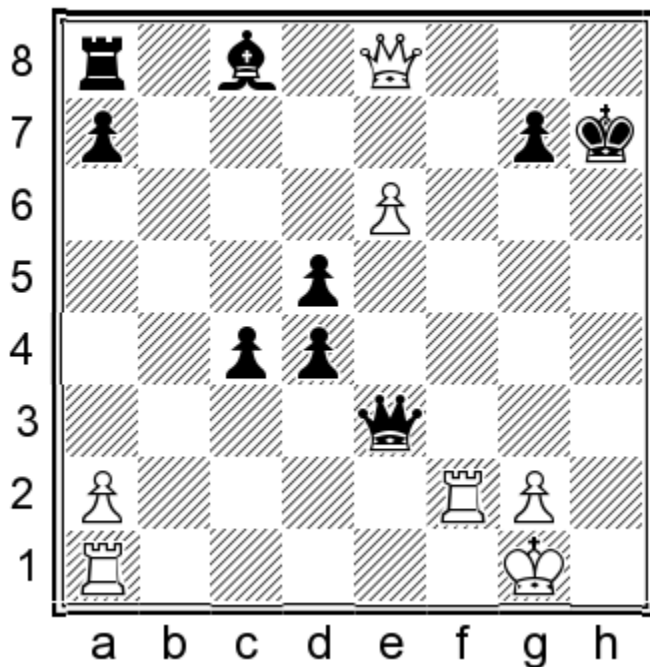




*Position after: 25.fxe6!*

White is temporarily sacrificing a piece but matters are forced. 25...Qxg5 26.Qe8+ Kh7 27.Rf8 Qe3+ 28.Kh1 Rxb2+ What else? Otherwise mate on h8 would be inevitable.

29.Kxh2 Qh6+ 30.Kg1 Qe3+ 31.Rf2+-

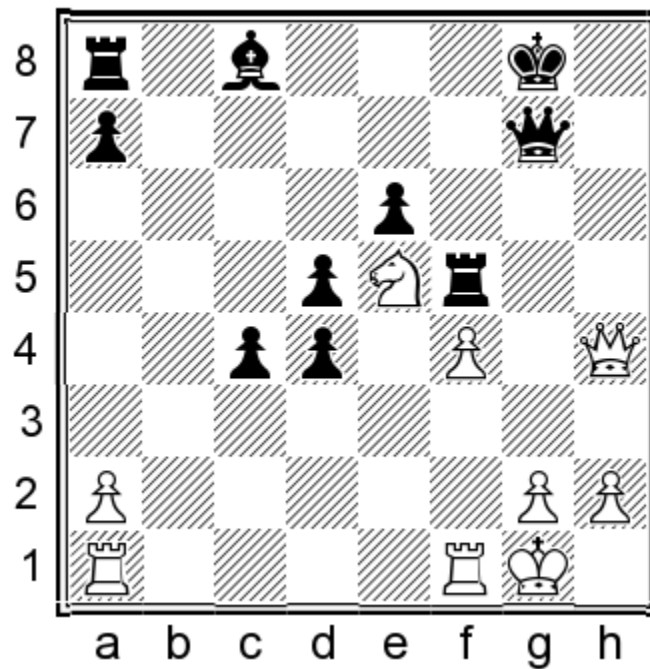


*Position after: 31.Rf2+- White has resurfaced with an extra exchange and thanks to their active pieces and the strong e6-pawn they should be able to convert the advantage pretty easily.*

**22.fxg7 Qxg7 23.Ne5**

Concrete lines might differ slightly but the bottom line remains the same - Black is consistently being dominated on the dark squares by White's knight.

**23...Rf5 24.Qh4!**



*Position after: 24.Qh4!*

Remember this should be the preferred square for the white queen. We will have a look at a couple more of Black's tries from practical play but, considering White's success rate has finally reached the mythical level of 100%, consider them to be more informal rather than critical opening knowledge.

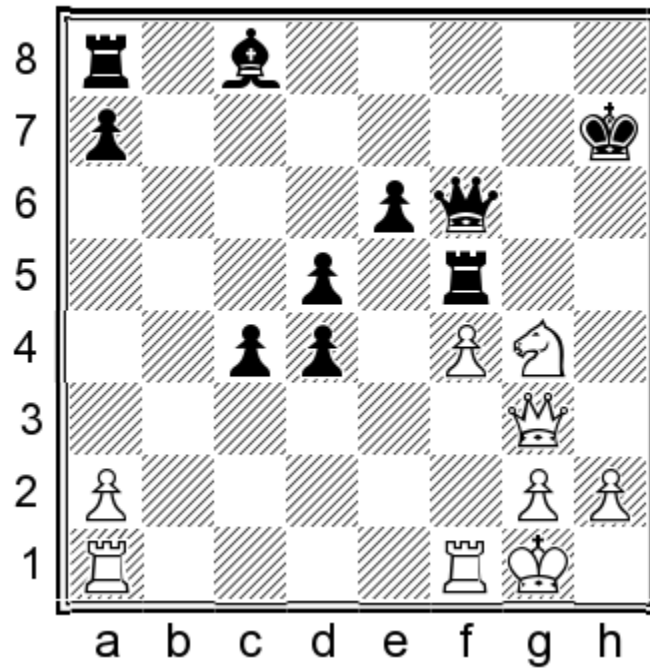
### **24...Qf6**

24...Qh7 25.Qd8+ Rf8 26.Qd6 saw Black struggling as well, e.g. 26...a5 27.Rf3 Ra7 28.Rh3 Qe7 29.Qb6+-.

### **25.Qg3+ Kh7**

25...Qg7 26.Qe1+- gives White another tempo for the Rf3-g3 maneuver since Black's king and queen will be under fire from the rook on g3.

**26.Ng4!**



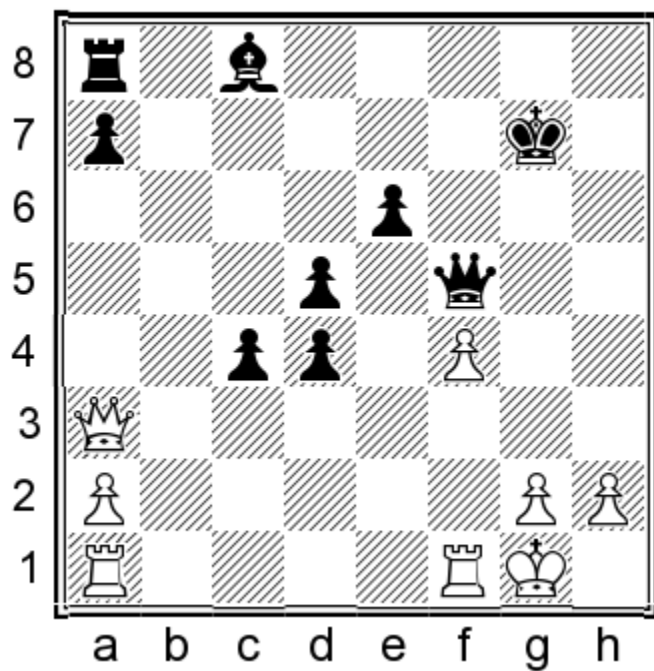
*Position after: 26.Ng4!*

As a matter of fact, 26.Rf3 should be sufficient as well but it is always nice to be as precise as the correspondence players are.

**26...Qg6 27.Qh3+ Kg8**

27...Kg7 28.Ne5+- and Rf3-g3 is curtains.

**28.Nh6+ Kg7 29.Nxf5+ Qxf5 30.Qa3!+-**

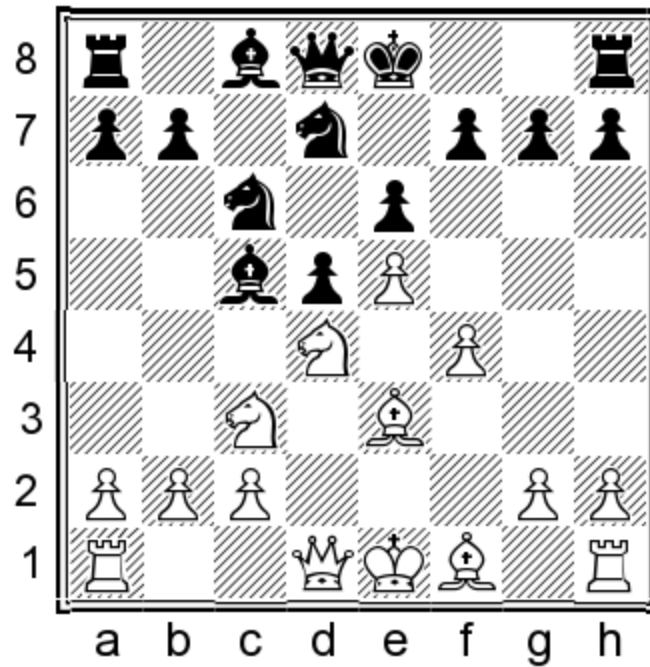


*Position after: 30.Qa3!+-*

# Chapter 15

## 7...cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5



# Chapter Guide

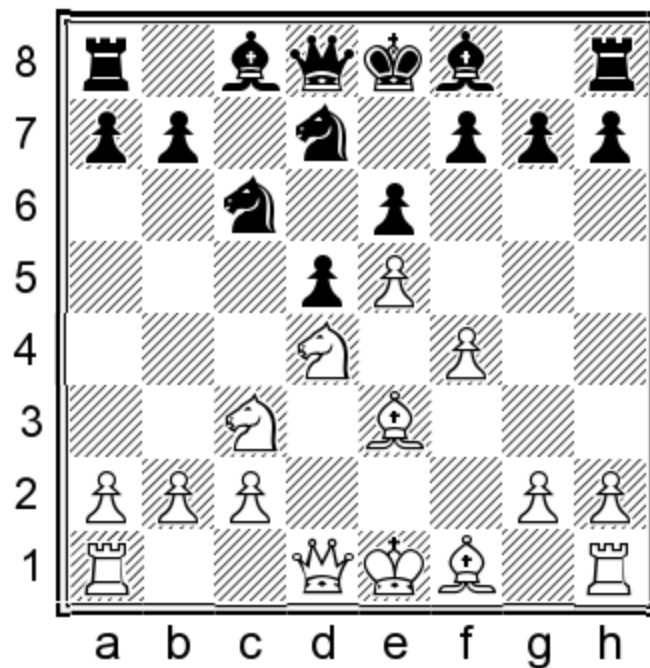
## Chapter 15 - 7...cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5 9.Qd2 0-0 10.0-0-0 a6 11.Qf2

- a) 11...Bb4
- b) 11...Nxd4
- c) 11...Qe7!?
- d) 11...Bxd4

**a) 11...Bb4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4**



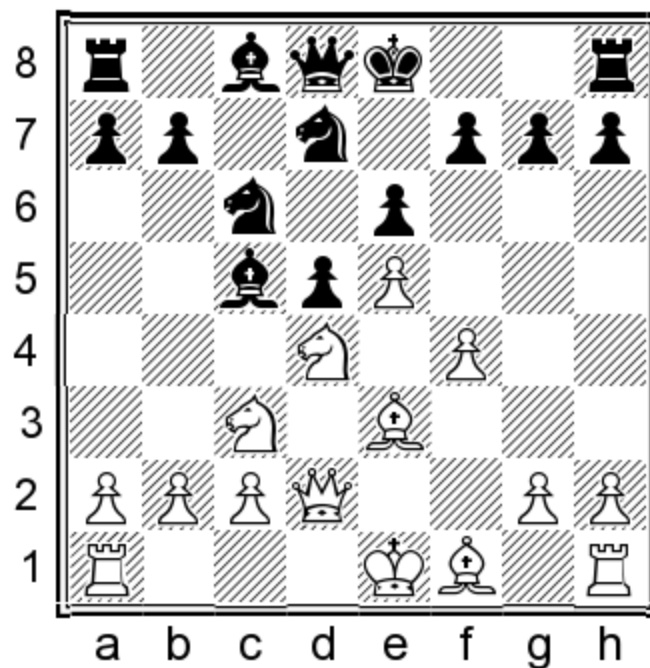
*Position after: 8.Nxd4*

## 8...Bc5

Another popular option for Black. They are gambling on the tension on the a7-g1 diagonal, arguing that bringing White's knight into the center with ...cxd4 was not a concession. It's true that the first player might get into problems if they do not approach their unstable center properly, but with correct play we should be able to gain an edge.

The other active bishop move, 8...Bb4 fails to impress. Beside the fact that ...Bxc3+ is not a real threat, and so White can even kick the bishop with a2-a3, 9.Be2 0-0 10.0-0 makes the move ...Bb4 seem absolutely pointless as it is completely misplaced there in short castle lines.

## 9.Qd2

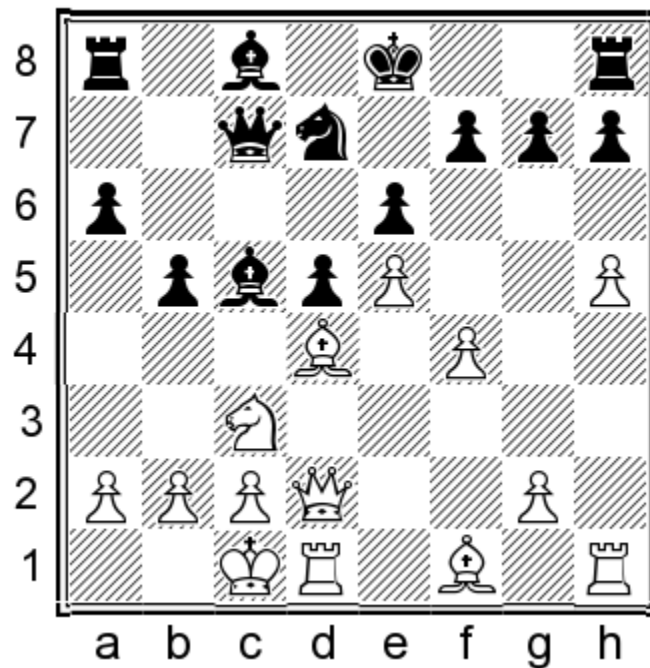


*Position after: 9.Qd2*



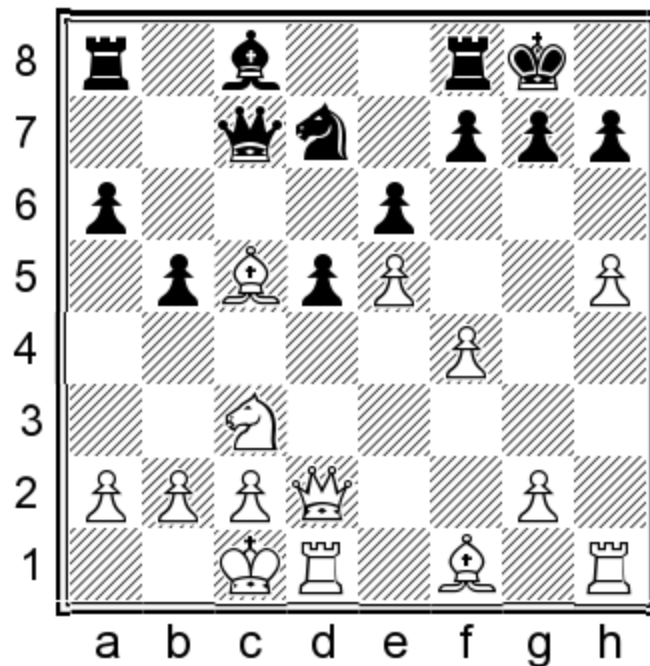
## 9...0-0

**A)** Black can hardly afford to be too clever and delay castling forever with, say, 9...a6 10.0-0-0 Nxd4 11.Bxd4 Qc7 [11...b5?, trying to start queenside counterplay without any preparation, fails to spot the sweet trick 12.Ne4!±.] As Black's ...Qc7 seems to be quite slow, I like the active move 12.h4! the most. Funnily enough Black will eventually be forced to castle short, straight into White's already rolling attack. 12...b5 13.h5



*Position after: 13.h5*

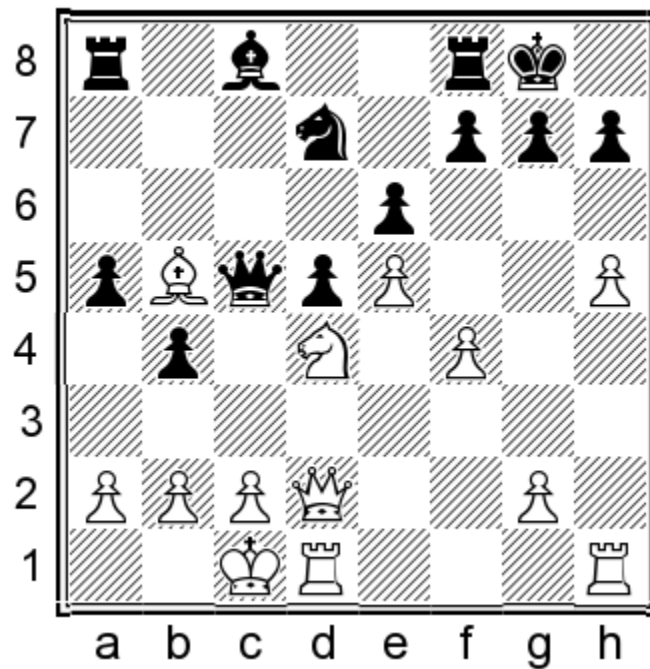
**A1)** 13...0-0 14.Bxc5



*Position after: 14.Bxc5*

**A1.1)** 14...Nxc5 lets White achieve textbook dominance on the dark squares with 15.h6 g6 16.a3! Bb7 17.Qd4 Rac8 18.Bd3± when Black's position looks completely hopeless from a strategical point of view. Their queenside counterattack is going nowhere while White will push g4 and f4-f5 very quickly.

**A1.2)** 14...Qxc5 15.Ne2 [15.h6 g6 16.a3 is possible here as well although to get the necessary control White needs to be quite radical with 16...Rb8 17.b4!<sup>2</sup>. Truth be told, Black's prospects are dim here, but I'd prefer not to expose my own king unless completely necessary.] 15...b4 16.Nd4 a5 17.Bb5!

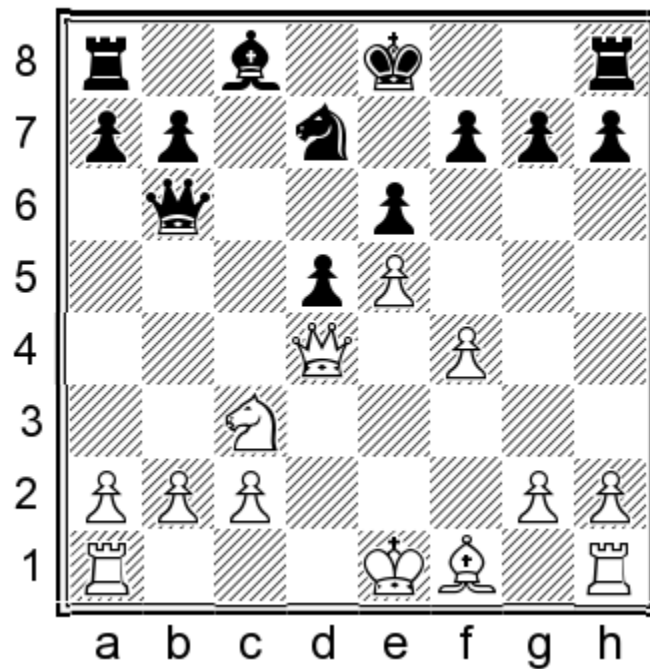


*Position after: 17.Bb5!*

We will be seeing more of this typical move. White's bishop is partially helping stop Black's counterplay and mainly eyeing the d7-knight. Should it move away after 17...a4 18.Kb1 Nb6, White has the nice tactical sequence 19.h6 g6 20.f5! exf5 21.Qg5, when it turns out the d7-knight was an important dark square defender as well!

**A2)** It is hard to suggest 13...b4 either as after 14.Na4! Bxd4 15.Qxd4 a5 16.h6 g6 17.Kb1± Black is stuck as well. Their pawns are going nowhere and they need to constantly watch their weakened kingside. While Black is wondering what to do with their king, White will prepare to open the position with c2-c4 (or c2-c3).

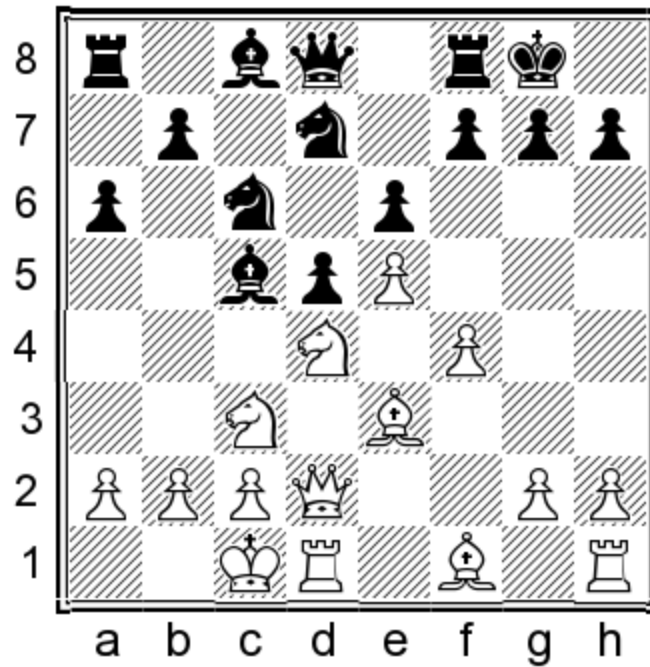
**B)** 9...Nxd4 10.Bxd4 Bxd4 11.Qxd4 Qb6



*Position after: 11...Qb6*

This move guarantees that Black will skip the middle game and go into a clearly worse endgame straight out of the blocks. 12.Nb5 Qxd4 13.Nxd4 Ke7 14.h4!<sup>2</sup> The only thing to watch out for was ...g7-g5 and now White can simply enjoy their spatial advantage and more active pieces. It is worth noting that even the current world champion Magnus Carlsen could not hold a similar endgame against Karjakin in 2019, albeit in blitz.

**10.0-0-0 a6**



*Position after: 10...a6*

## 11.Qf2

White's queen is getting closer to the kingside, as well as preparing the developing move Bd3 and increasing the dark-squared diagonal tension even more.

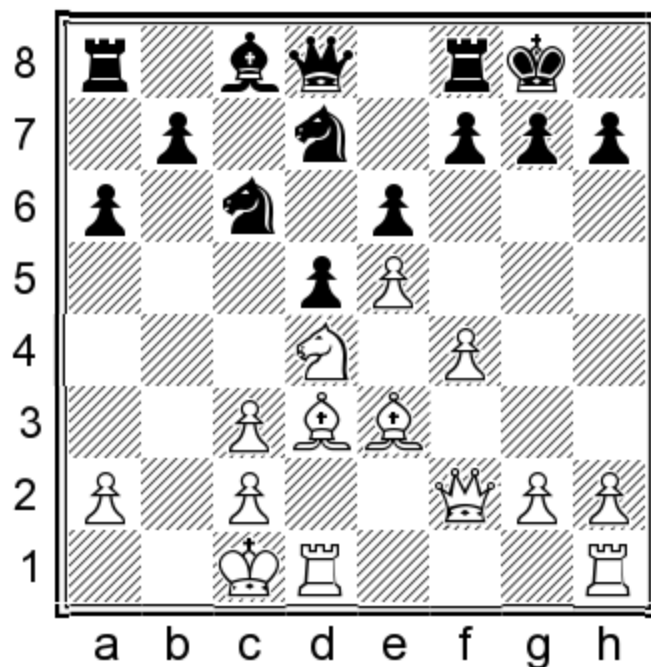
**A)** If you feel like conducting some research yourself, I feel there is plenty of room for it, and many different variations such as 11.h4 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 b5 13.h5 b4 14.Na4 Bxd4 15.Qxd4 Qa5 16.b3.

**B)** Even the slightly unusual 11.Nb3 looks quite promising. Preparing one weapon in depth rather than superficially skimming through many should be the preferred way though!

## 11...Bb4

Clearly inefficient as White can easily parry it with Nce2 but let me show you the more direct and fearless option.

**12.Bd3! Bxc3 13.bxc3f**



*Position after: 13.bxc3*

This position illustrates how precious Black's dark-squared bishop is in such set-ups. The second player is unable to threaten White's monarch because 13...Qa5 will be met by 14.Kd2. On the other hand, once White's bishop pair opens fire on Black's kingside, there will be little relief for the defender.

**b) 11...Nxd4**

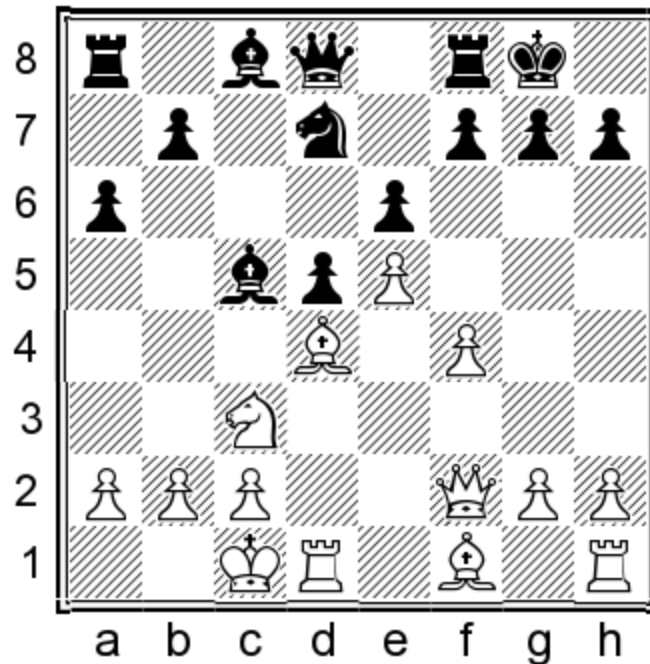
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5 9.Qd2 0-0 10.0-0-0 a6 11.Qf2**

Besides the bishop capture,

## 11...Nxd4

is clearly another critical option as well, although Black's most successful try has been transposing into 11...Bxd4 by swapping the other pair of minor pieces as well.

## 12.Bxd4



*Position after: 12.Bxd4*

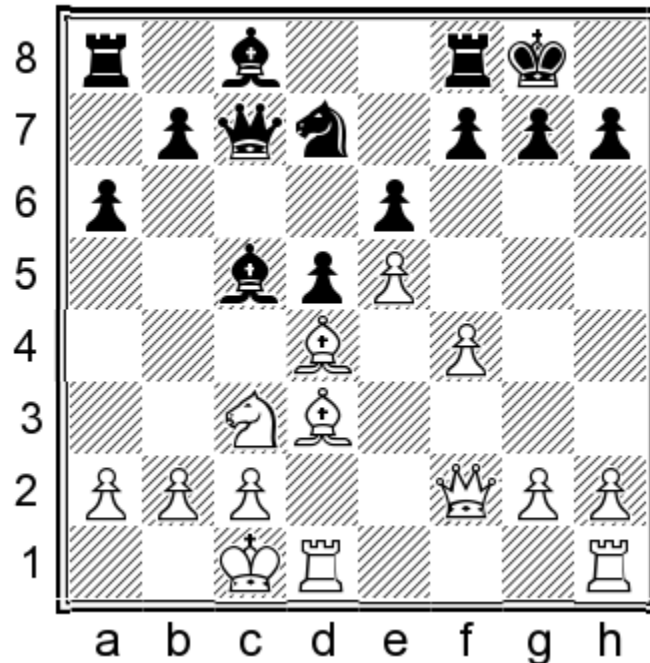
## 12...b6!?

Play takes quite a new direction. Although the move ...b6 seems to be too modest to create serious counterplay, White needs to tread carefully.

**A)** 12...Bxd4 13.Qxd4 will transpose.

**B)** 12...Qc7 has been the most frequent move in practical play but as soon as White players learnt how to deal with it, it also became the worst scoring one. We can safely

conclude that the black queen belongs on a5, not c7.  
13.Bd3

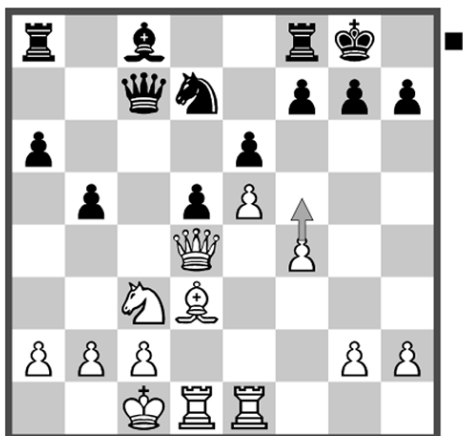


*Position after: 13.Bd3*

**B1)** Giving White additional time with 13...b5?!, letting them create a hook for their attack on the kingside with 14.Qh4! h6 15.Ne2± leaves Black in a very sticky situation. The g2-g4-g5 advance will be very quick.

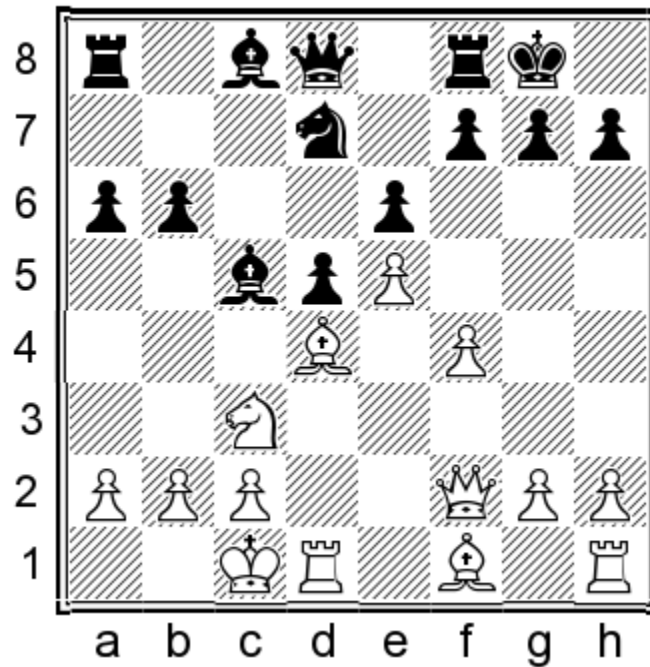
**B2)** 13...Bxd4 14.Qxd4 b5 [Endgames arising after moves such as 14...Qc5 15.Ne2<sup>2</sup> are bad as usual; an example could be Grischuk - Iljushin, Krasnoyarsk 2003.]  
15.Rhe1!





*Position after: 15.Rhe1!*

This is the key move, completely dismantling Black's set-up. White's idea is simple – there is no force powerful enough to stop the f4-f5 advance now that the e5-pawn is protected by the rook. [White should resist the temptation to be flashy with tactics like 15.Ne4?! as after 15...dxe4 16.Qxe4 g6 17.Qxa8 Bb7 18.Qa7 Nc5 19.b4 Na4∞ the position is anything but clear due to their severely weakened king.] Attempting to get counterplay with 15...Rb8 16.f5 b4 fails miserably to 17.f6! bxc3 18.Bxh7+ Kxh7 19.Qh4+ Kg8 20.Qg5+-.



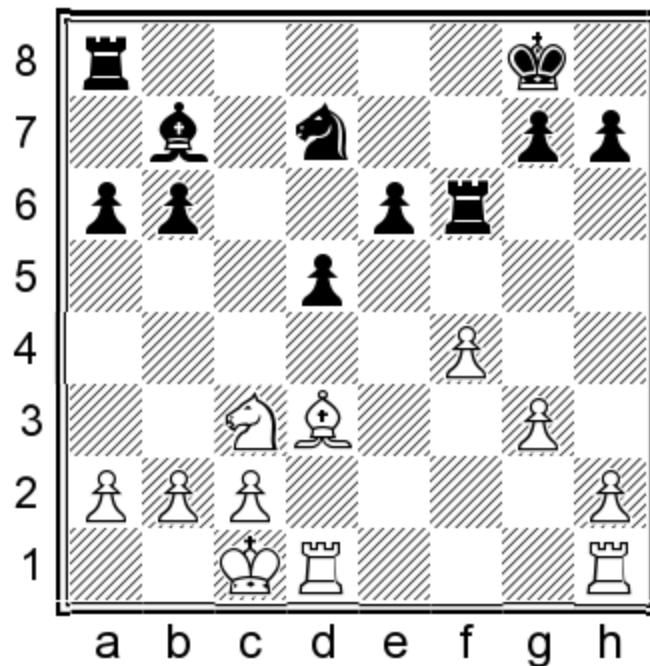
*Position after: 12...b6!?*

### **13.Kb1!**

Slow play works best here. White's king will be much safer on b1 in many lines and the d4-square remains protected by the d1-rook, discouraging the immediate ...f6.

**A)** Black's idea is best shown after 13.Bd3 when it turns out the main point of the move ...b6 is to prepare the undermining 13...f6!. Especially from a practical point of view it is difficult to play for White and they have suffered several painful defeats.

**B)** 13.Qe3!?, preparing for the inevitable ...f6, is a good option too. Ponomariov gained a nice edge against Ni Hua in Khanty-Mansiysk 2011 after 13...Bb7 14.Bd3 Bxd4 [14...f6 15.Qh3!+-] 15.Qxd4 f6 16.exf6 Qxf6 17.Qxf6 Rxf6 18.g3<sup>2</sup>.



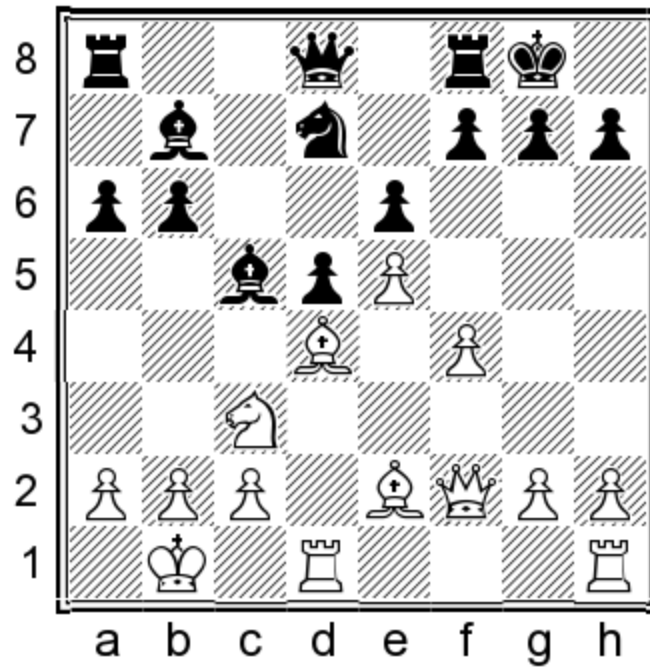
*Position after: 18.g3<sup>2</sup>*

### **13...Bb7**

After 13...f6 14.exf6 Qxf6 15.g3!<sup>2</sup>, White keeps everything under control – note that this reinforcing move would not be possible had White moved their bishop to d3 on move 13 instead.

### **14.Be2!**

Still the same strategy – White is carefully making a developing move, keeping the possibility of ...f6 in mind. 14.Bd3?! would be the wrong square again due to 14...f6!.

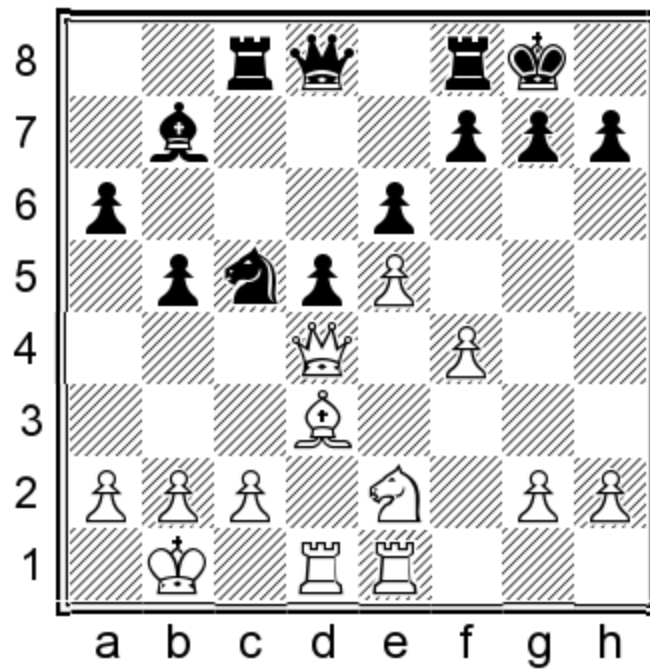


*Position after: 14.Be2!*

**14...Rc8 15.Rhe1!**

With White having so much central control it is very unlikely that Black will be able to play ...f6 successfully. Switching to more active queenside play does not promise them much either.

**15...b5 16.Bd3 Bxd4 17.Qxd4 Nc5 18.Ne2<sup>2</sup>**

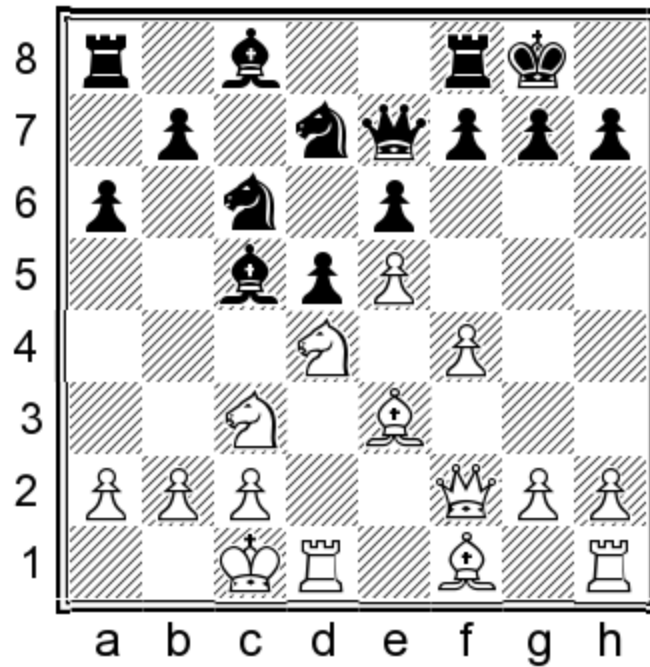


*Position after: 18.Ne2*

with a typical edge for White.

**c) 11...Qe7!?**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5 9.Qd2 0-0 10.0-0-0 a6 11.Qf2  
Qe7!?**



*Position after: 11...Qe7!?*

A pet line of my compatriot DK Sharma. It might look a bit quizzical but one should not underestimate it.

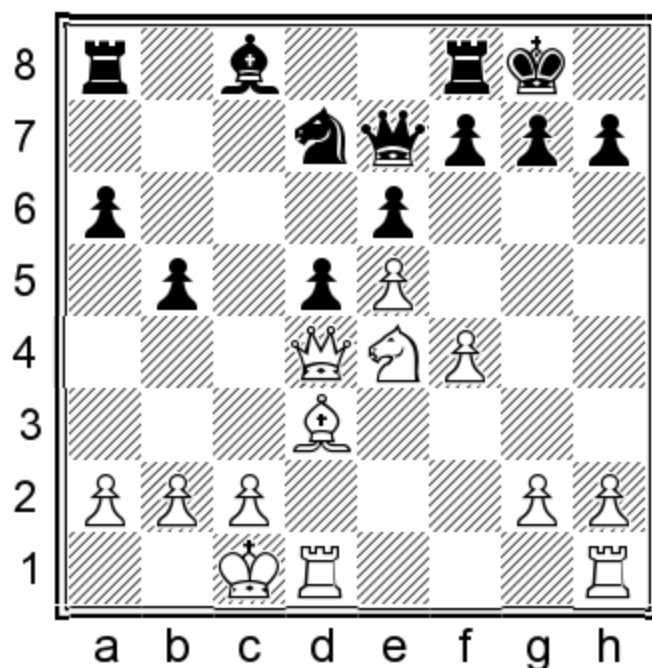
## **12.Bd3!**

12.Kb1 has been slightly more successful in practice but Black is quite well placed after 12...Nxd4 13.Bxd4 b5 14.Bd3 Bxd4 15.Qxd4 Bb7. It is definitely easier to play for White but objectively I am not sure whether their edge is so significant. Fortunately, we can get a much clearer advantage.

## **12...f6**

This leads to a one-sided endgame almost by force, with nice winning chances for White.

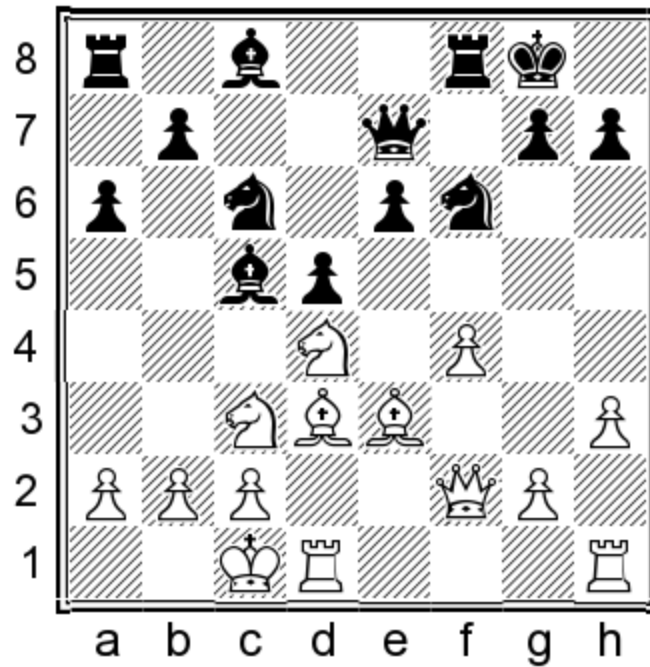
12...Bxd4? is now impossible due to 13.Bxd4 Nxd4 14.Qxd4 b5 15.Ne4!±.



*Position after: 15.Ne4!±*

You might remember a similar trick not working very well with the black queen on c7. Now everything is silky smooth for the attacker as Black has no queen-trapping ideas anymore.

**13.exf6 Nxf6 14.h3**



*Position after: 14.h3*

### **14...Bb4**

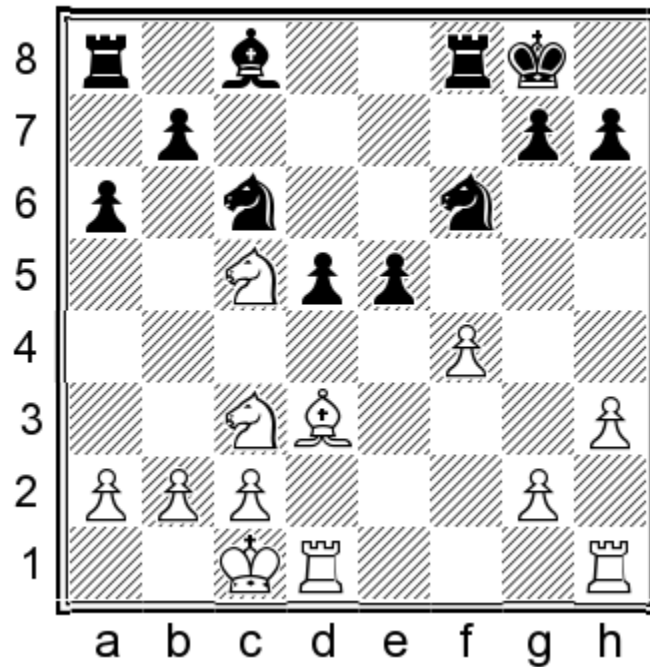
14...Bd6 is the non-forcing way to play for Black but White retains a nice advantage with natural moves. 15.Kb1 Bd7 16.Rhe1 Rac8 17.Qd2<sup>2</sup> After securing the center and moving the queen away from the f8-f2 x-ray, White is ready to start an attack with g2-g4.

### **15.Nb3!**

This is actually prophylaxis against 15...e5 which is now met with

**16.Bc5! Bxc5 17.Qxc5 Qxc5 18.Nxc5**



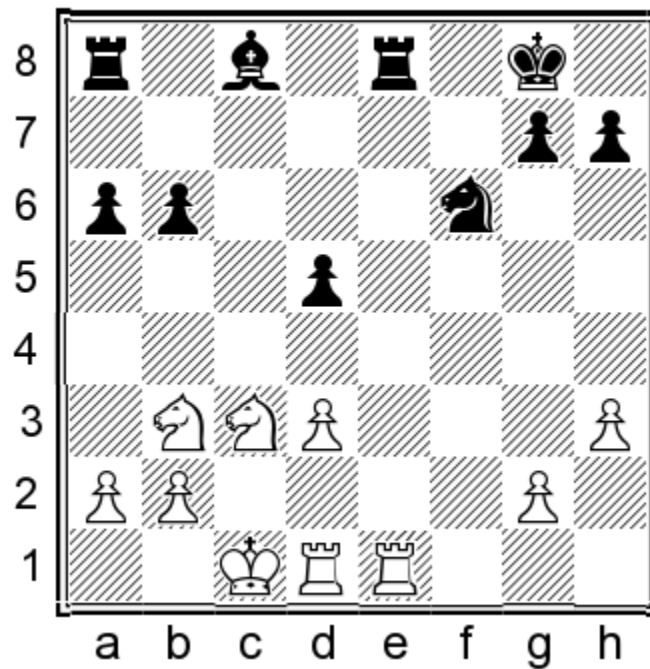


*Position after: 18.Nxc5*

### **18...b6**

Black will not be able to hold their extra pawn after 18...exf4 for too long. 19.Rhf1 g5 20.Nxd5 Nxd5 21.Bc4 Nce7 22.Bxd5+ Nxd5 23.Rxd5 h6 24.Rd6<sup>2</sup> Black's pawns are awkwardly weak and White's pieces are clearly superior in terms of activity.

**19.fxe5 Nxe5 20.Rhe1 Re8 21.Nb3 Nxd3+ 22.cxd3<sup>2</sup>**

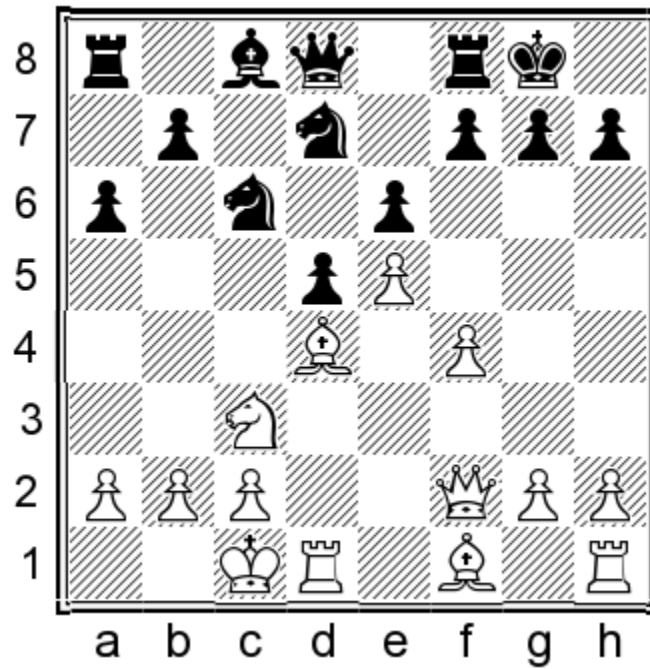


*Position after: 22.cxd3<sup>2</sup>*

It is true that the pawn structure is symmetrical but White's knight is much better than Black's light-squared bishop in the current scenario. After it starts occupying the blockading d4-square, there will be little doubt who is in charge.

**d) 11...Bxd4**

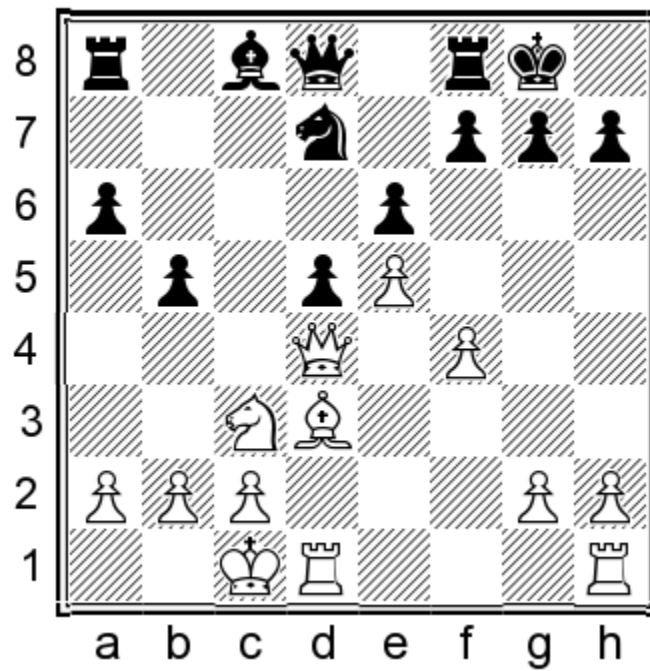
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5 9.Qd2 0-0 10.0-0-0 a6 11.Qf2 Bxd4 12.Bxd4**



*Position after: 12.Bxd4*

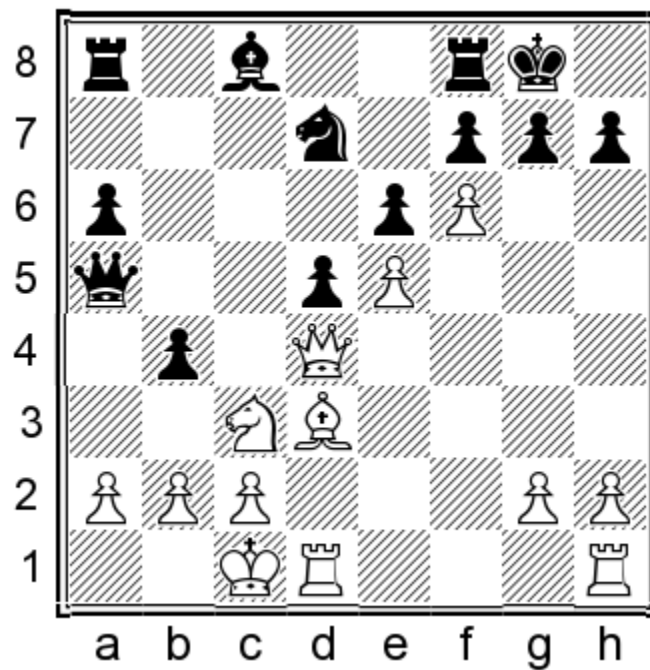
## **12...b5**

All the positions with the white queen on d4 such as 12...Nxd4 13.Qxd4 are bad for Black as a rule. It is simply too difficult to develop their queenside counterplay effectively. 13...b5 14.Bd3



*Position after: 14.Bd3*

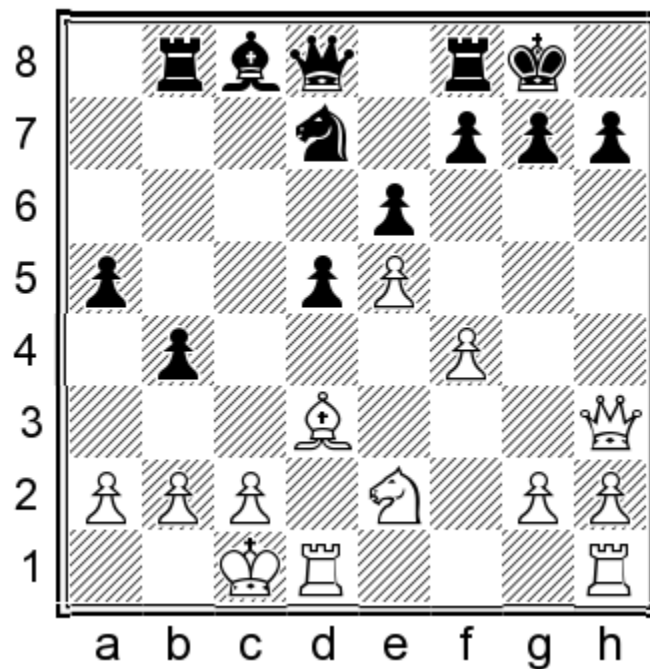
**A)** Note that the more active 14...Qa5? backfires after 15.f5! b4 16.f6



*Position after: 16.f6*

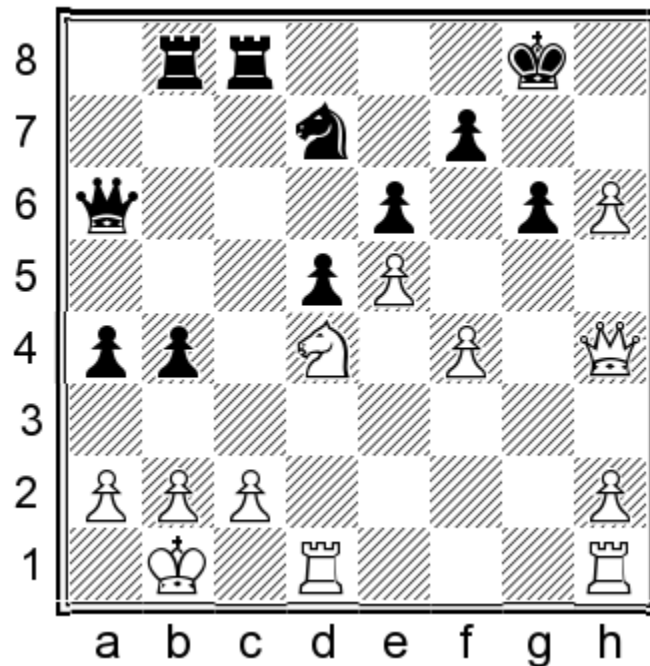
when White gets a crushing attack after, for example, 16...g6 [16...bxc3 17.Bxh7+! is a recurring theme. 17...Kxh7 18.Qh4+ Kg8 19.Qg5+-] 17.Nb1 Qxa2 18.Rhf1!, intending Rf3-h3 and Qh4.

**B)** 14...Rb8 The second player would like to play ...b4 in one move for sure, but it is difficult to do so with the white queen sitting on d4. 15.Qe3! Since Black has already spent a tempo on preparing ...b4, White's queen takes the time to prepare swinging over to the kingside, intending to provoke a weakness by moving to h3. [Here 15.f5? is not possible thanks to the presence of the black queen on d8 – 15...b4 16.f6 bxc3 17.Qg4 Nxf6-+ repels White's attack and gives Black a decisive material advantage.] 15...b4 [15...f5? this rarely helps Black in opposite-castling French positions due to 16.g4!,,] 16.Ne2 a5 17.Qh3



*Position after: 17.Qh3*

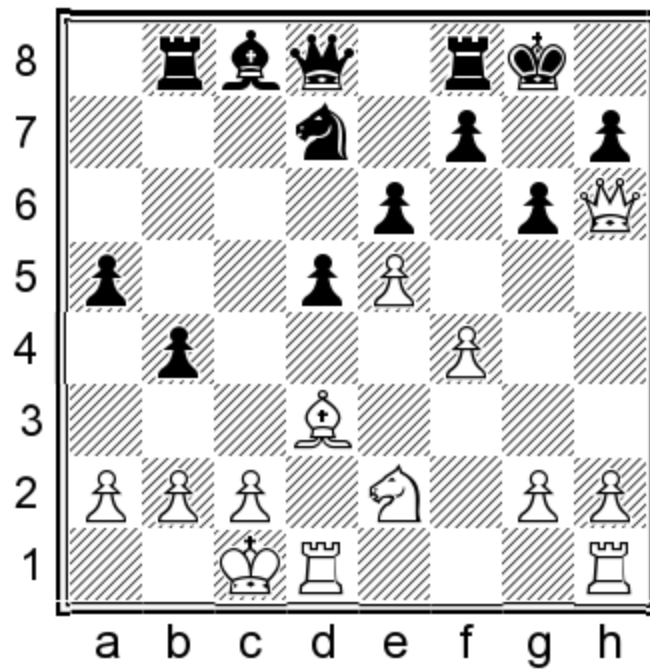
**B1)** After 17...h6 18.g4 Qb6 19.g5 Ba6 20.Bxa6 Qxa6 21.Nd4 Black has to give up a pawn with 21...a4 [21...b3 22.cxb3! is an important point, intending to meet 22...a4 with 23.gxh6 g6 24.a3!, adopting a familiar defensive pawn structure.] 22.gxh6 g6 when White is in full control. 23.Qh4 Rfc8 24.Kb1



*Position after: 24.Kb1*

Black cannot really get anywhere with their attack since 24...b3 will always be met by 25.cxb3 axb3 26.a3! when the white king feels very safe while its counterpart remains in danger.

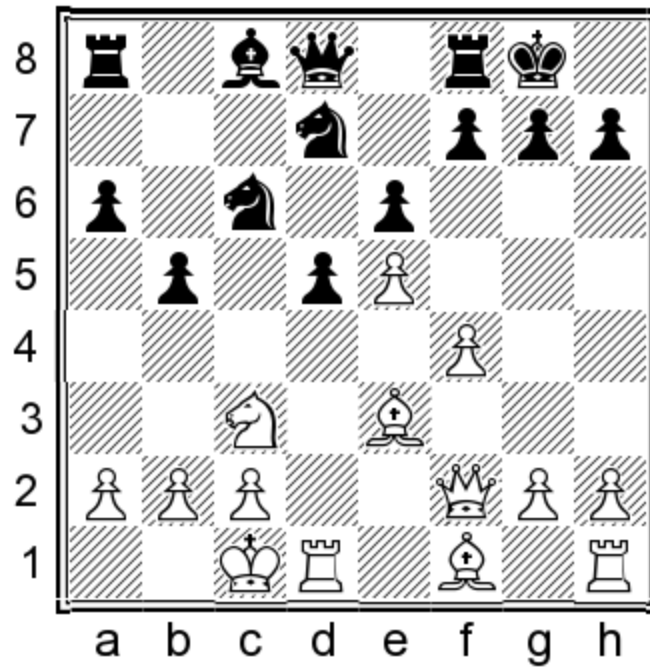
**B2)** 17...g6 The other pawn move does not help much either. 18.Qh6



*Position after: 18.Qh6*

White has to watch out for a couple of cheap tricks but once they manage to push h4-h5, it will be an immediate KO. 18...Nc5 [18...Qe7 19.h4+ -] 19.Nd4! [19.h4? Nxd3+ 20.cxd3 b3! 21.a3 Qc7+ would be quite embarrassing.] 19...Qc7 20.Kb1, Safety first. White is ready to continue with the kingside initiative.

**13.Be3!**



*Position after: 13.Be3!*

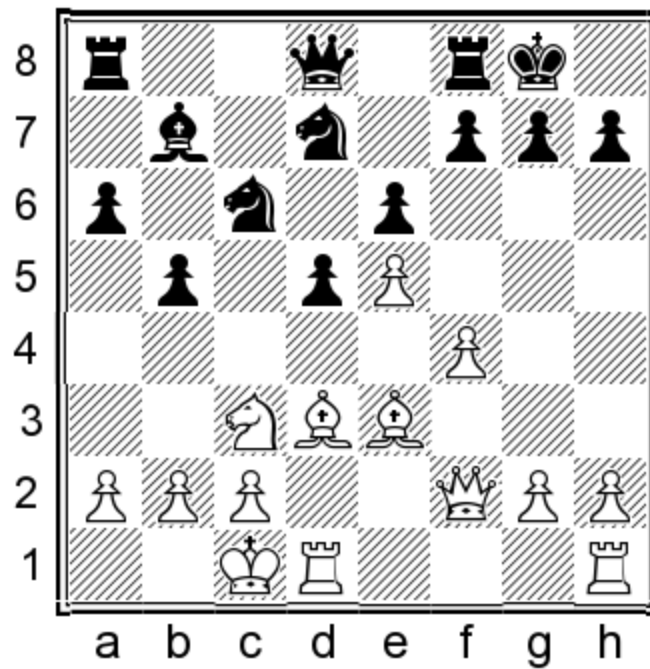
Black will dearly miss their dark-squared bishop. Many players have tried defending this set-up a number of times but Black's results are unconvincing.

### **13...Qa5**

The most recent try, although it has already gone out of fashion. ...b4 is the immediate threat.

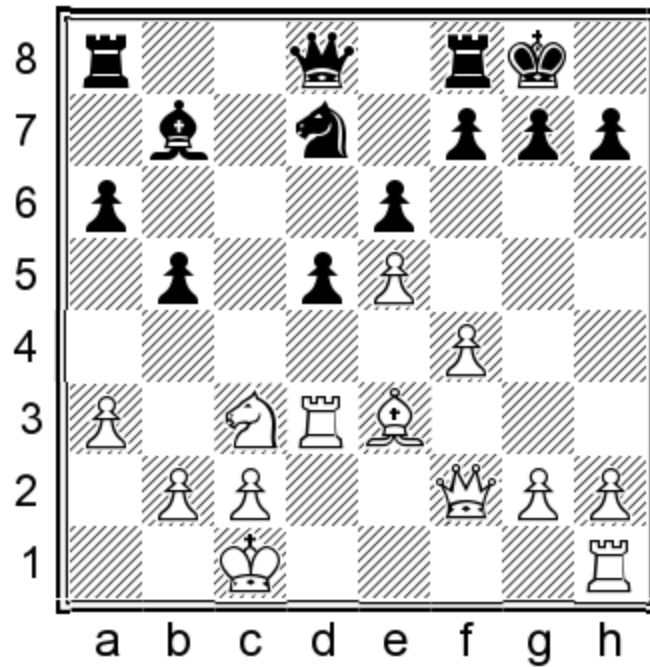
**A)** Black can hardly afford to take it slow with 13...Bb7 14.Bd3.





*Position after: 14.Bd3*

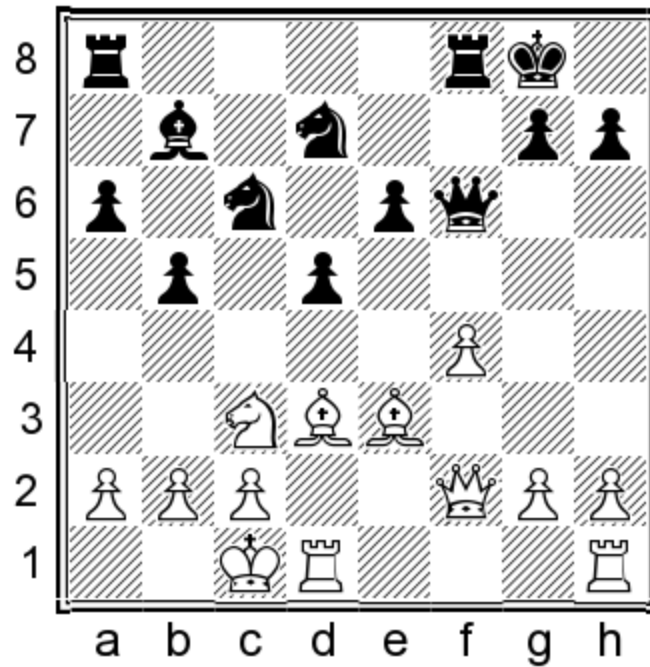
**A1)** 14...Nb4 15.a3! is the simplest way to keep a nice edge for White, which is fully in the spirit of the 13...Qa5 line. 15...Nxd3+ 16.Rxd3



*Position after: 16.Rxd3*

As White is threatening to switch their attention to the kingside with Bd4 and Rg3 – the fact that opposite-colored bishops are on the board only strengthens their attacking cause – it would be logical to try 16...f6 17.exf6 Nxf6 18.Bd4± but Black's position always remains quite unappealing.

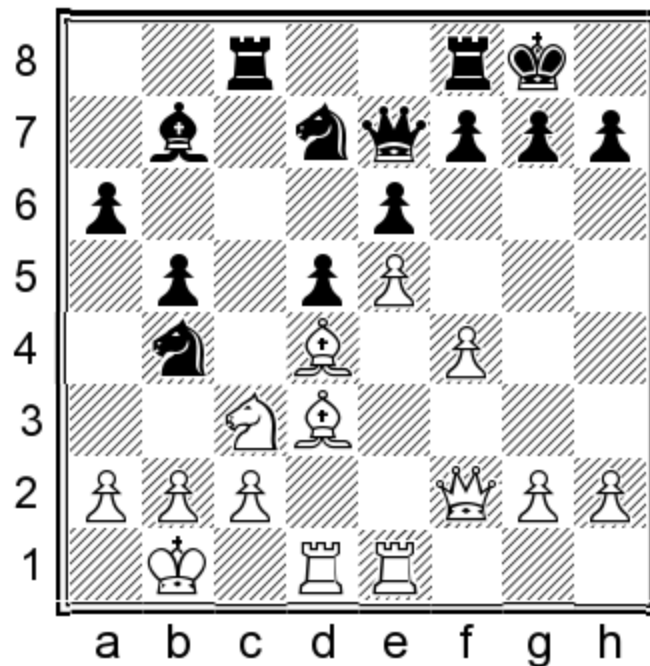
**A2)** Opening the position for White's bishops with 14...f6 15.exf6 Qxf6, as in Dominguez – Narciso Dublan, Barcelona 2007, can hardly be any good.



*Position after: 15...Qxf6*

Dominguez was clearly better after 16.Qg3 Qf7 17.Qh3 Nf6 18.Bc5±.

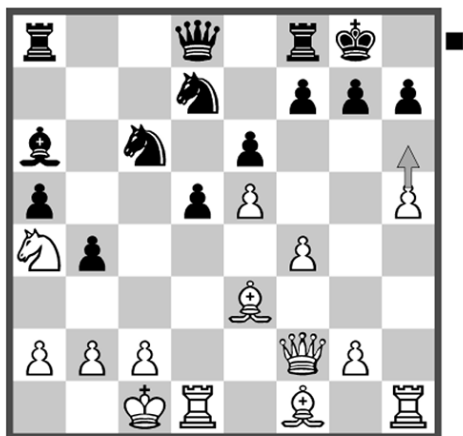
**A3)** 14...Rc8 15.Kb1 Qe7 [15...Nb4 16.a3 is similar to the line discussed above.] 16.Rhe1 Nb4 17.Bd4,



*Position after: 17.Bd4,*

If Black captures the d3-bishop, they will only fuel White's attack by helping them speed up their rook lift to the third rank. They can hardly just sit still though, as White has the simple g2-g4 and f4-f5 plan in stock as well.

**B)** 13...b4 This used to be the main line until White players found the destructive h6-move mentioned below. 14.Na4 a5 [Opening the position with 14...Bb7 15.Kb1 f6 as always just helps White's bishops. 16.Nc5 Nxc5 17.Bxc5 Rf7 18.exf6 Qxf6 19.g3<sup>2</sup>] 15.h4 Ba6 16.h5



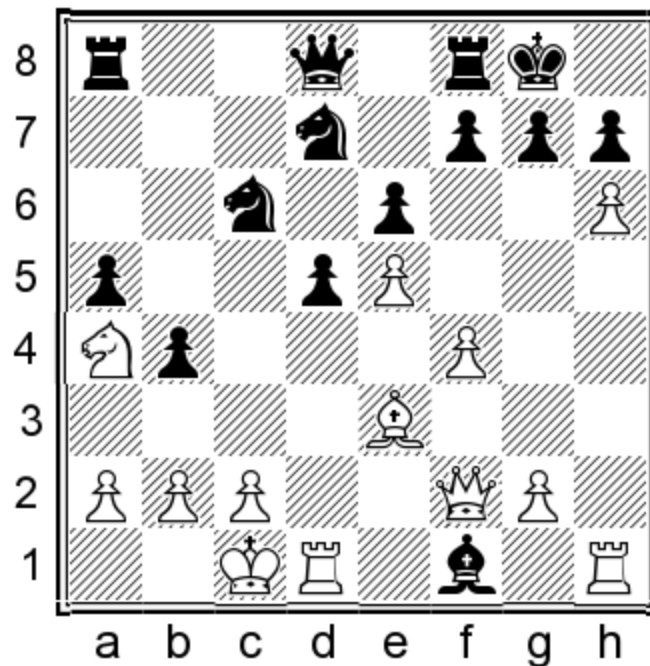
*Position after: 16.h5*

**B1)** Later on Black switched to 16...Qc7 17.h6 g6 18.Kb1<sup>2</sup> instead but Black's position is full of dark-squared holes and simply horrible to play for them.

**B2)** 16...Qe7 does not contribute to Black's counterattack on the other side at all, and therefore White can happily continue the onslaught with 17.h6 g6 18.g4,.

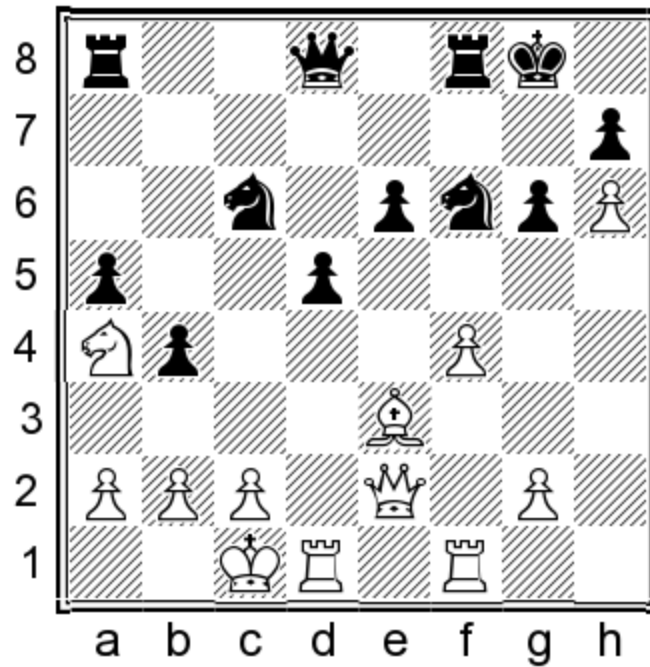
**B3)** 16...f5 17.exf6 Qxf6 18.Bxa6 Rxa6 19.Qe2 Raa8 20.h6 g6 21.Kb1, also gives White a tremendous pull on the dark squares.

**B4)** 16...Bxf1 17.h6! Until White discovered this option, Black was relatively successful with a subsequent ...f6, quickly undermining the center. However, the discovery of this strong Zwischenzug lead to a rapid decline in the whole system's popularity. [17.Rhxf1 f6 18.exf6 Nxf6 19.h6 Ng4! is the key problem with simply recapturing the bishop.]



*Position after: 17.h6!*

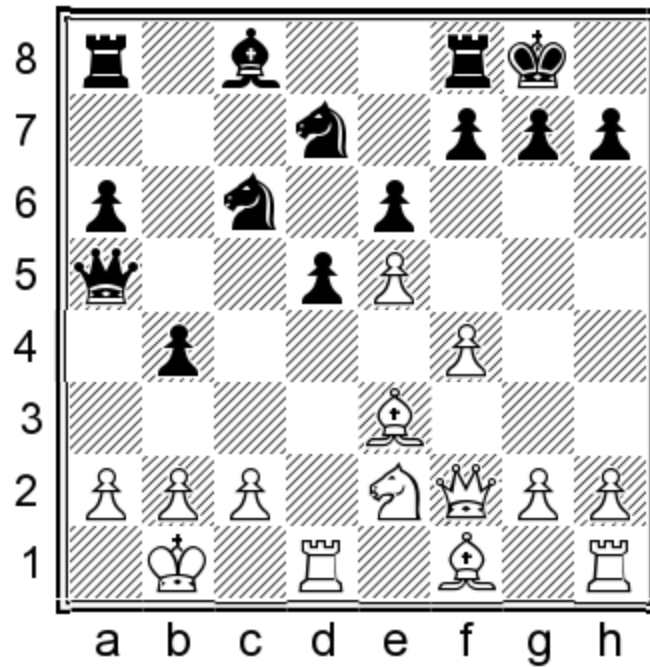
17...g6 [17...Bb5? leads to a quick mate after 18.hxg7 Kxg7 19.Qg3+ Kh8 20.Rxh7++-.] 18.Rhxf1 f5 19.exf6 Nxf6 Including the moves h6 and ...g6 makes a huge difference, as Black's position will remain permanently damaged. It is only important to remember not to give up the strong e3-bishop, so 20.Qe2± is called for.



*Position after: 20.Qe2±*

It is no surprise that White convincingly won all their games in the database which reached this position.

**14.Kb1 b4 15.Ne2**



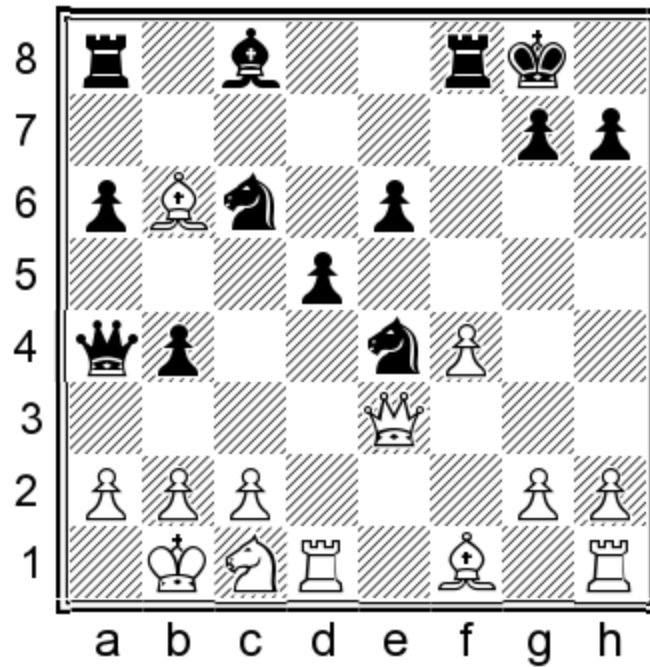
*Position after: 15.Ne2*

**15...Qc7**

Black has sidestepped the Na4 line but the time loss caused by maneuvering their queen here and there could prove to be fatal.

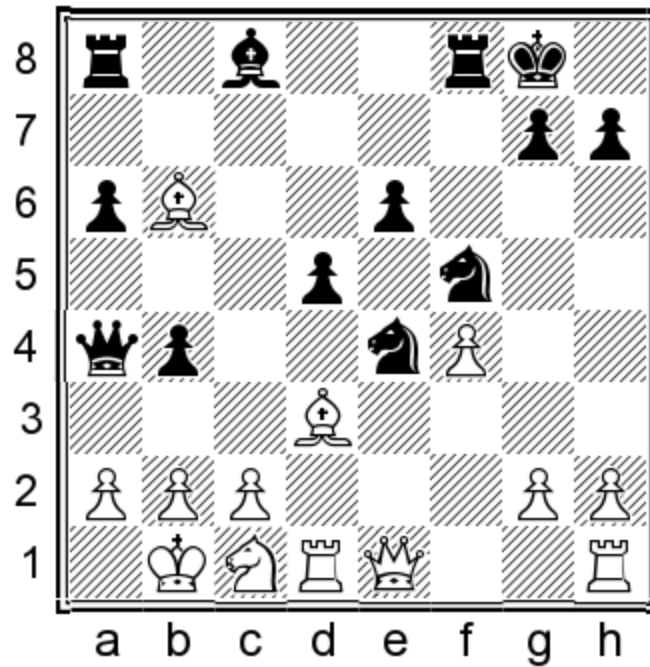
15...f6 16.exf6 Nxf6 17.Bb6 leads to a nice sequence.  
17...Ne4 18.Qe3 Qa4 19.Nc1!





*Position after: 19.Nc1!*

It will turn out that Black's queen could be in danger after Nb3, Bd3xe4, and Nb3-c5 – therefore it needs to be evacuated. After that White will have a clear strategic plus.  
 19...Ne7 [19...Rb8 20.Nb3!] 20.Bd3 Nf5 21.Qe1



*Position after: 21.Qe1*

White is much better coordinated and we can safely conclude that they are better. Let me just note that Black is unable to gain stability in the center with 21...Nfd6 due to 22.Bc7!, relinquishing the bishop pair for a chance to attack Black's light-squared weaknesses after 22...Ra7 23.Bxd6 Nxd6 24.Nb3±, intending Nd4.

## **16.Nd4**

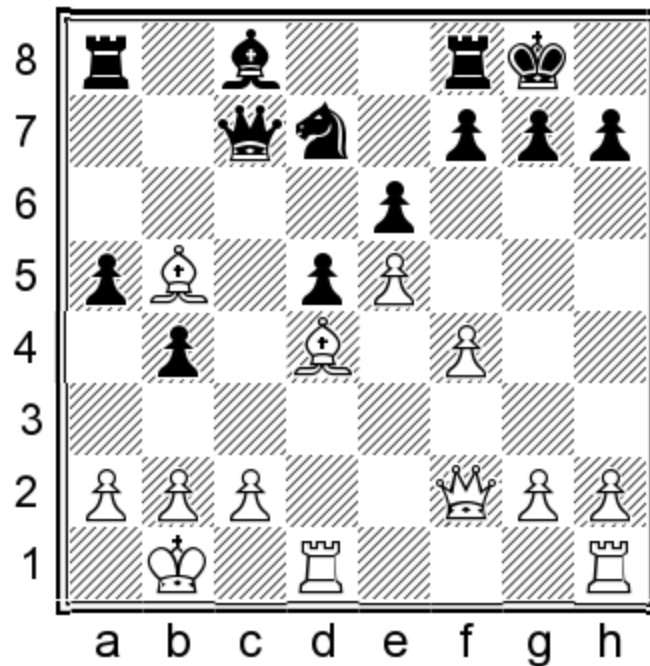
Parimarjan Negi recommends 16.Ng3, which has been quite successful in practice after 16...a5 [16...f6!? should be the critical try.] 17.Nh5 a4 18.Qh4!. I will offer you a more sophisticated path, intending to get a one-sided opposite-colored bishop attacking game.

## **16...Nxd4**

16...a5 17.Bb5 Nxd4 18.Bxd4 transposes.

### 17.Bxd4 a5

If White develops their bishop to d3, Black is ready to exchange it with ...Ba6 immediately. Therefore my suggestion is to play the more active 18.Bb5!



*Position after: 18.Bb5!*

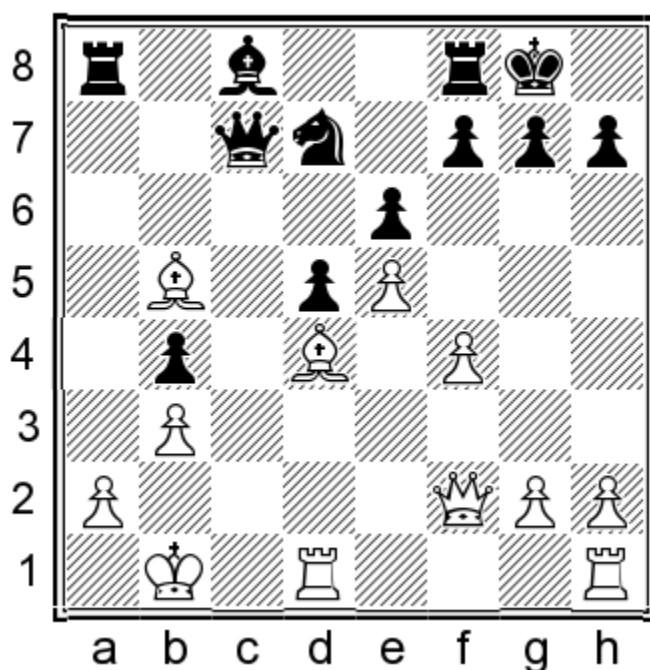
with the idea of swapping on d7. It turns out that Black's light-squared bishop is quite useless for his queenside play, while his d4-rival is a sleeping cell which can be activated at any time should White succeed in pushing f4-f5.

### 18...Ba6

The only principled move, otherwise Black might not get another chance to force the b5-bishop off the board.

After both **A)** 18...Qb7 19.Bd3! and **B)** 18...Rb8 19.Bd3! Black has voluntarily rid themselves of the option of playing ...Ba6, so there is no point in being clever anymore.

**C)** 18...a4? landed Black in great problems immediately in So - Holt, PRO Chess league 2017. 19.b3! axb3 [In the game mentioned above Black simply gave up a pawn immediately with 19...Ba6 20.Bxa4+- and lost without any resistance.] 20.cxb3

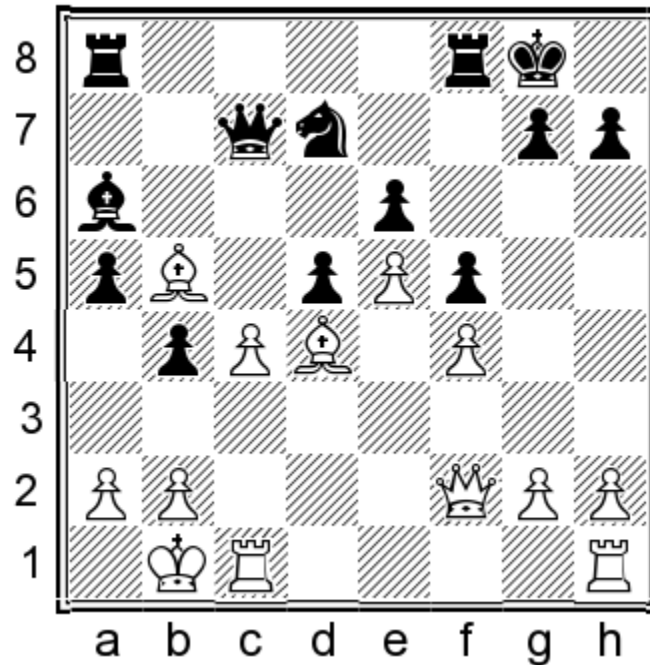


*Position after: 20.cxb3*

with a dream set-up for White. They can even afford to exchange the light-squared bishops on a6 and build up on the c-file after 20...Ba6 21.Rc1 Qd8 22.Bxa6 Rxa6 23.Rc2± when the d7-knight is stuck and the b4-pawn is chronically weak.

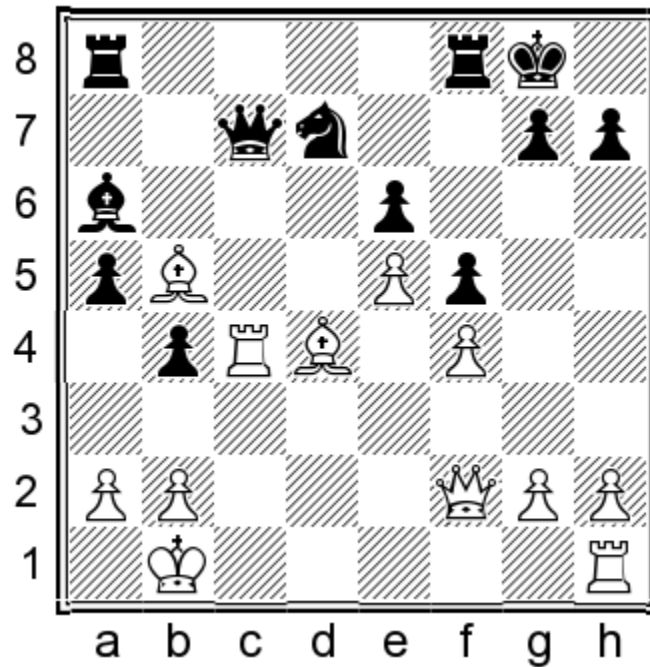
**D)** After 18...f5, capturing on f6 can be considered too but I prefer punishing Black for failing to play ...Ba6 straight

away with 19.Rc1! Ba6 20.c4!, opening the c-file once again.



*Position after: 20.c4!*

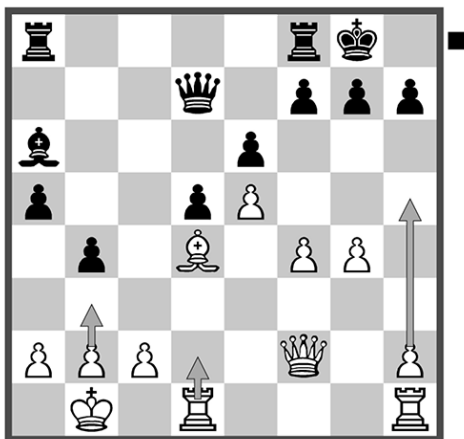
20...dxc4 [20...Bxb5 21.cxb5 Qb7 22.Qe2 Rac8 23.b3± gives White a strong passer; while 20...Qb7 21.Bxa6 Rxa6 22.Qf3!± will cause irreparable damage to Black's pawn structure.] 21.Rxc4



*Position after: 21.Rxc4*

21...Qb7 [21...Qxc4 22.Bxc4 Bxc4 23.Rd1± is not necessarily completely lost but Black is hoping for a draw at most.] 22.Bc6 Qc7 23.Rcc1 Rac8 24.Qf3± White is in complete command of the whole board.

**19.Bxd7 Qxd7 20.g4**

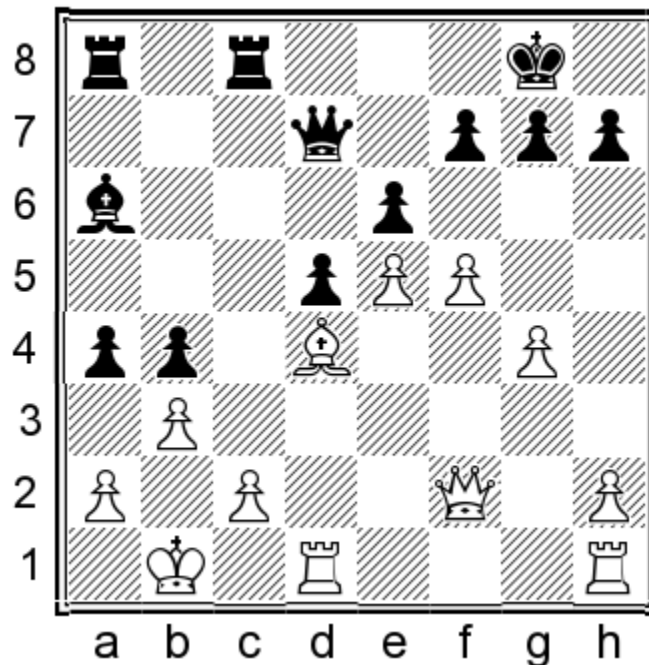


*Position after: 20.g4*

At first it seems as if not much is happening, but on closer inspection it turns out Black has no real long-term plan while White can simply continue rolling their pawns on the kingside. It could be that Black is already close to losing here.

## **20...Qb5**

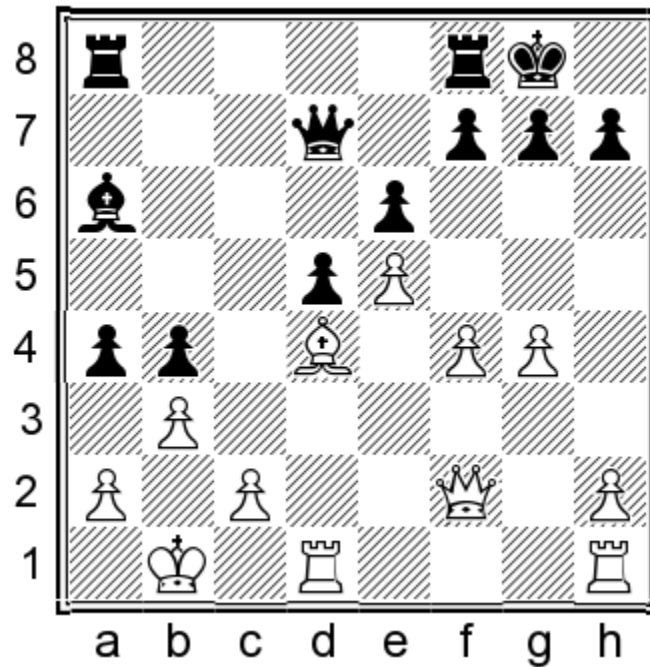
**A)** It is important to understand a couple of key points in order not to give Black any counterplay. 20...Rfc8 21.f5 a4 22.b3!



*Position after: 22.b3!*

First of all, White should never allow Black to play ...b4-b3. 22...Qb5 23.Rd2! We definitely do not want to allow Black's queen to jump forward with ... Qe2.

**B)** 20...a4 21.b3!

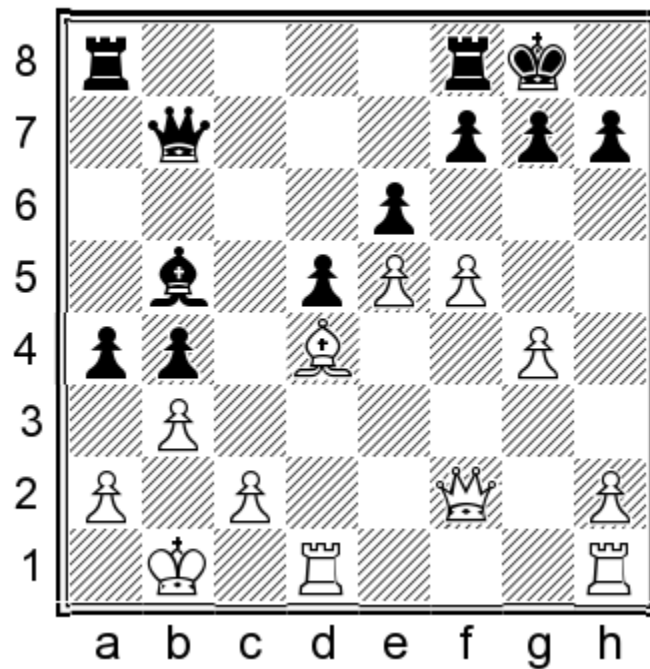


*Position after: 21.b3!*

**B1)** White's attack was rolling very smoothly in Yemelin – Zvjaginsev, St. Petersburg 2013. 21...Rfc8 22.f5 Rc6 23.f6 Rac8 24.Qe3 Qd8 25.Rd2± While it is true Black eventually managed to hold in the blitz game, his position was simply lost.

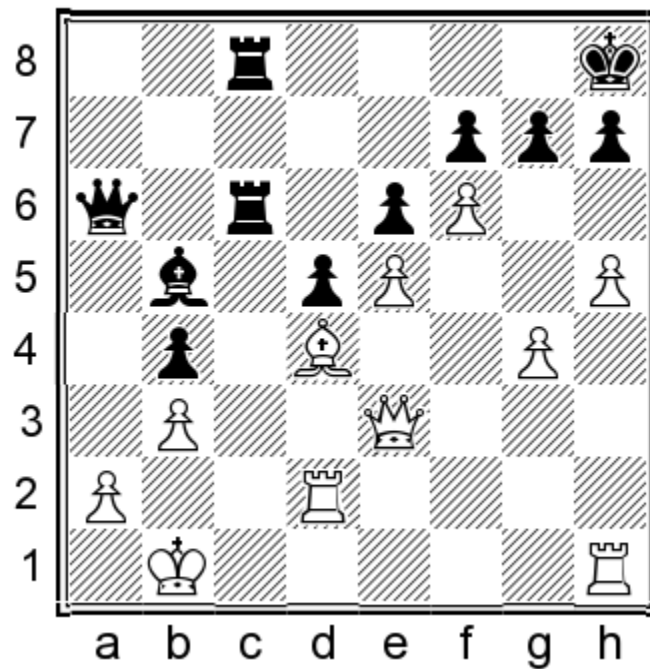
**B2)** 21...Bb5 22.f5 Qb7





*Position after: 22...Qb7*

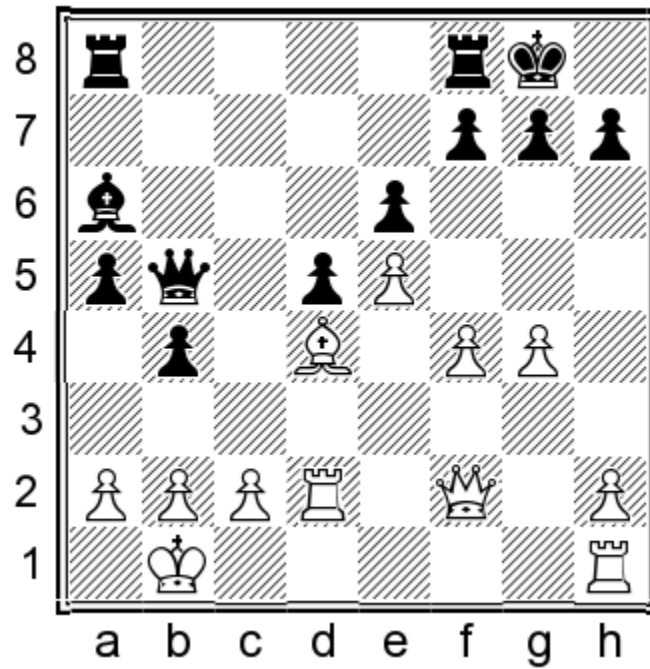
23.Rd2! Remember this set-up! [Here we also need to protect the a2 and d3-squares – after 23.f6? Qa6 24.Rd2 axb3 25.cxb3 Bd3+!µ White is not in time to do both.]  
 23...Qa6 24.Qe3! Stopping the bishop's invasion via d3. Now everything is ready for White's attack since Black cannot make progress. 24...Rfc8 25.h4 Rc6 26.f6 Kh8 27.h5 axb3 28.cxb3 Rac8



*Position after: 28...Rac8*

Black is threatening ...Bf1 and ...Rc1+ so one extra prophylactic move, 29.Rhd1!+-, is called for before accepting Black's resignation.

**21.Rd2!**

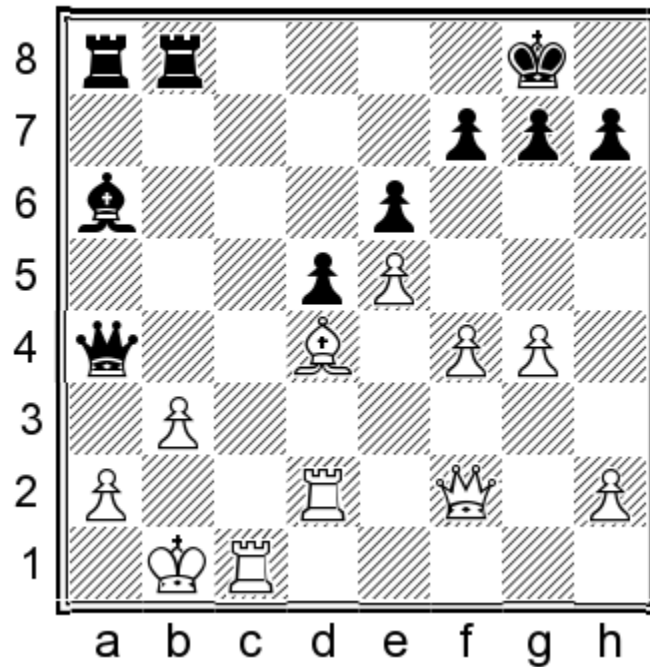


*Position after: 21.Rd2!*

Stopping ...Qe2 once again.

**21...a4**

Note that the 21...b3 sacrifice never works in the opposite-colored bishop set-up. 22.cxb3 a4 23.bxa4 Qxa4 24.b3 Rfb8 25.Rc1

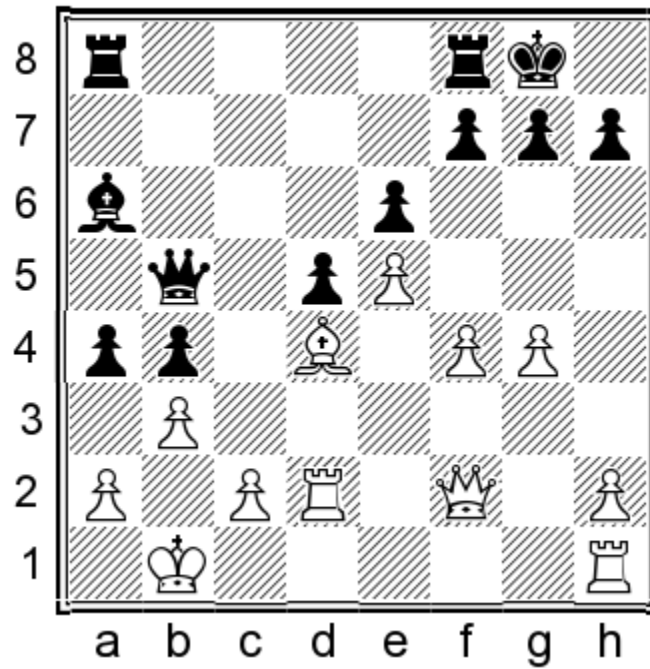


*Position after: 25.Rc1*

since Black can hardly break through with 25...Bc4 26.Rc3 Bxb3 27.Rxb3 Rxb3+ 28.axb3 Qxb3+ 29.Kc1±, and without any drastic measures then White is simply a healthy pawn up.

By now your hand should automatically be responding to ...a4 with...

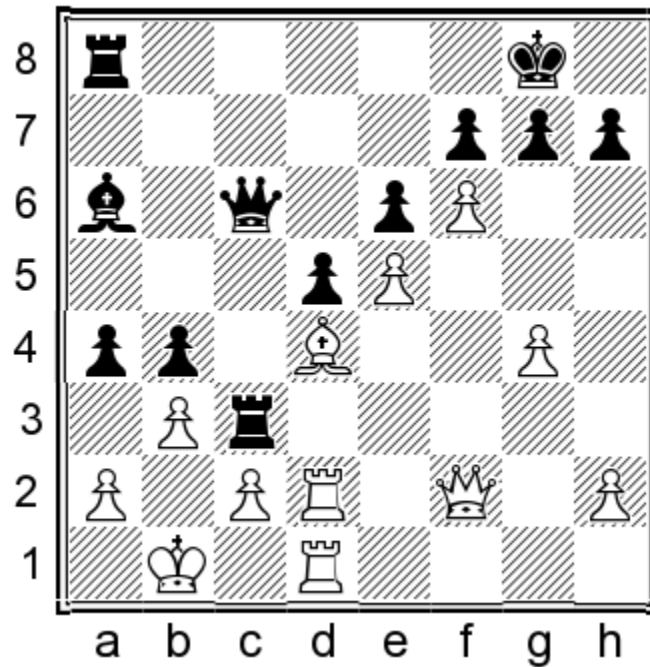
**22.b3!**



*Position after: 22.b3!*

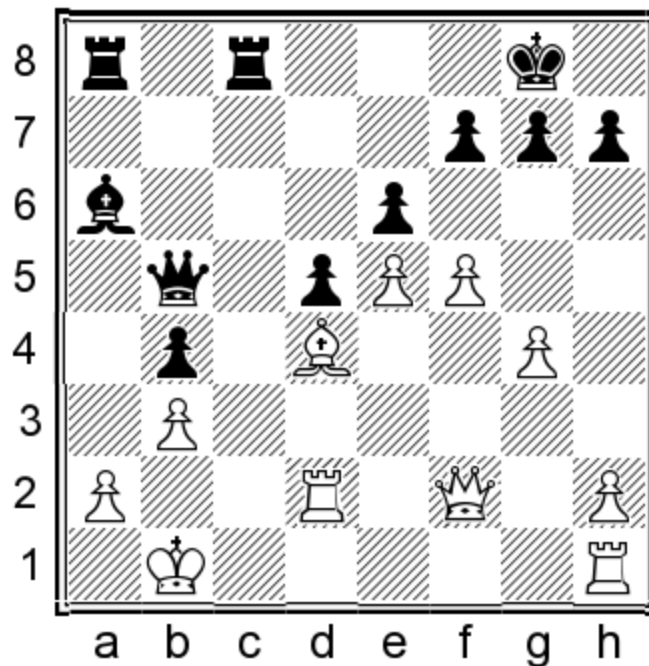
### **22...axb3**

Let me note that 22...Rfc8 23.f5 Rc3!? is not very impressive as long as you do not accept the Greek gift and just roll on with 24.Rhd1 Qc6 25.f6!.



*Position after: 25.f6!*

White's attack will arrive first. 25...Rc8 [After 25...axb3 26.cxb3 Rc8 we can neutralize Black's threats easily with 27.Bxc3 bxc3 28.Rc2+-, keeping both the material advantage and attack.] 26.Bxc3! Now is the right time to eat the rook since we need to slow Black down a bit. At the same time, checkmate seems to be imminent on the other side of the board. 26...bxc3 27.Rd4 axb3 28.axb3 Qc5 29.Qf4+- 23.cxb3 Rfc8 24.f5



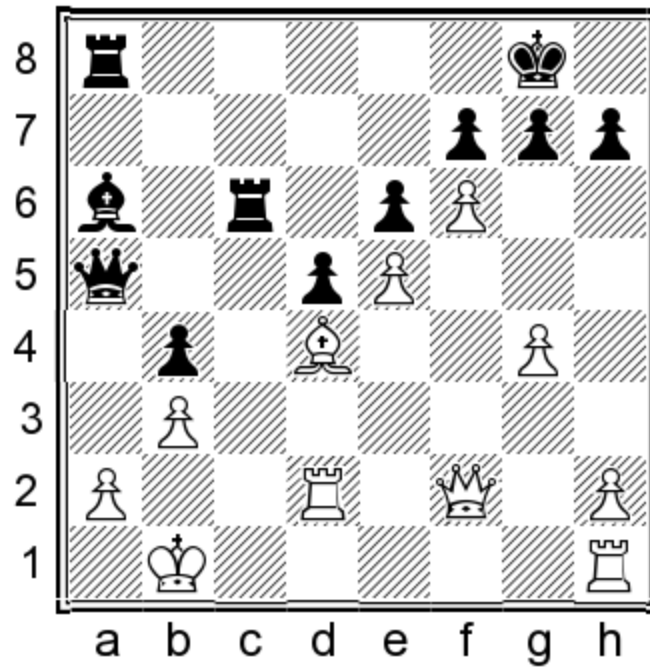
*Position after: 24.f5*

### **24...Rc6**

24...Rc3 is ineffective as White can either accept the exchange immediately or take the d3-square under control first with 25.Rhd1! and after 25...Rac8 26.Bxc3 bxc3 27.Rc2 Black does not have much to show for the sacrificed material.

### **25.f6 Qa5**

Black's rooks are not generating any real threats on the c-file and White will be the first one to deliver any killing threats after 25...Rac8 26.Qf4+-.



*Position after: 25...Qa5*

## **26.Qe3!**

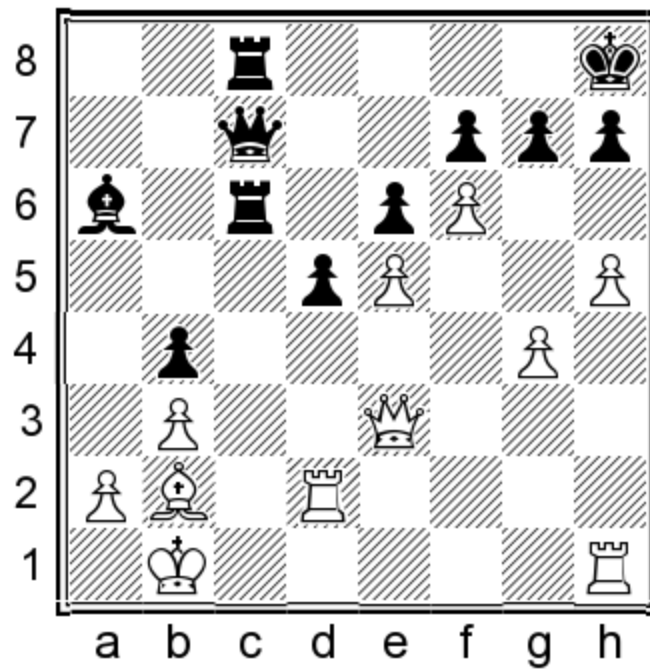
Here we need to be more careful about the queen's placement since White needs to control both the a2 and d3-squares. Black's attack has come to a halt again and it is time to push the kingside pawns further.

Remember to stay focused and not make any silly mistakes like 26.Qf4?, losing touch with the critical d3-square.

26...Bd3+!-+

**26...Kh8 27.h4 Rac8 28.h5 Qc7 29.Bb2!**





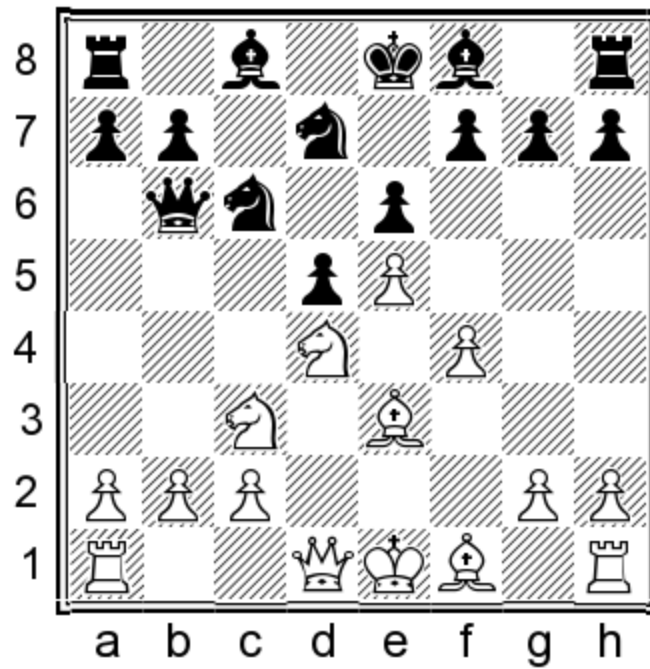
*Position after: 29.Bb2!*

It has taken Black several moves to organize themselves on the c-file, while it took just one simple bishop move to parry their threats. White's kingside pawn storm is nearly decisive and 29...Rc2 30.g5!+- will see them prevail soon.

# Chapter 16

## ...cxd4 & ...Qb6 - Road to Tabiya

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 16 - ...cxd4 & ...Qb6 (Road to tabiya)

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3 11.Bb5  
Nxd4 12.Bxd4

a) 11...-- alternatives b) 12...Bb4 13.0-0! 0-0

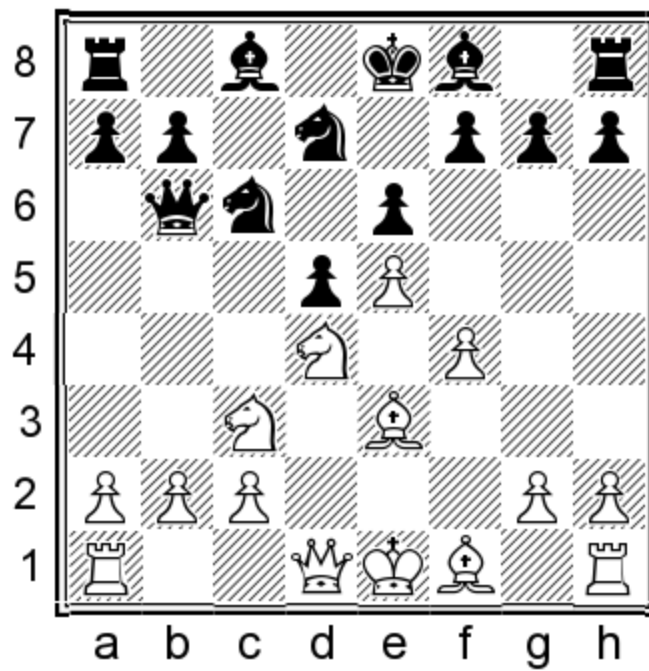
c) 12...Bb4 13.0-0! a6

d) 12...a6 & 16...Qa3

e) 12...a6 & 16...Qd8

### a) 11...-- alternatives

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6**



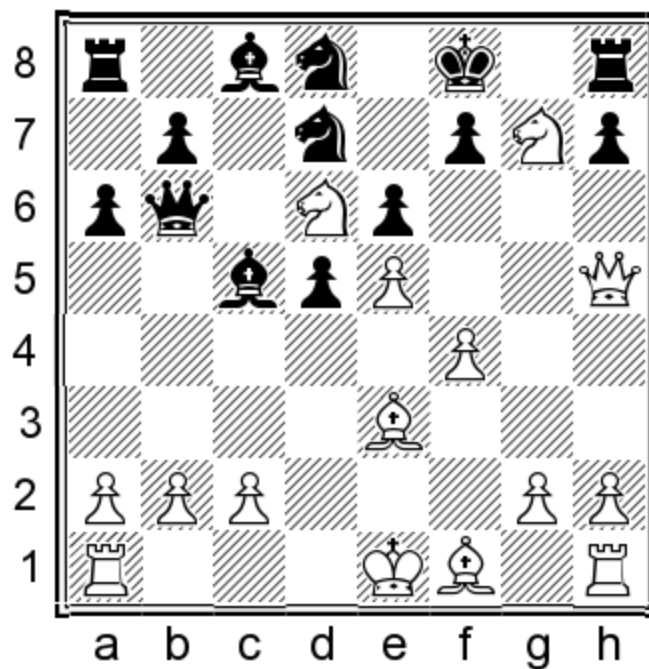
*Position after: 8...Qb6*

One can argue that, from a theoretical point of view, this is Black's most testing set-up – it is true that the ensuing positions have often already been analyzed (and played!) until deep into the endgame. Nevertheless, if you are well prepared, Black's best scenario is being in a position on the wrong side of the draw, and even then still having to fight to achieve it.

## 9.Qd2

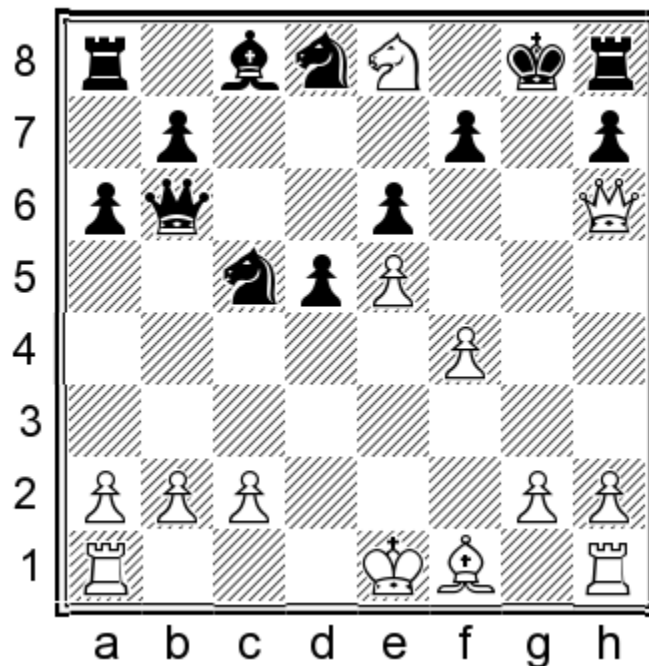
**A)** Statistically White has been mildly successful with other moves like 9.a3...

**B)** ...or 9.Ncb5 too, but objectively there is not much. The following line is quite a good example: 9...a6 10.Nf5 Bc5 11.Nbd6+ Kf8 12.Qh5 Nd8 13.Nxg7



*Position after: 13.Nxg7*

**B1)** Good stats for White are the result of old blunders committed by opponents of John Nunn. 13...Kxg7?? 14.Qg5+ Kf8 15.Bxc5 Nxc5 16.Qh6+ and Black loses an exchange and the game since 16...Kg8 runs into 17.Ne8+-.

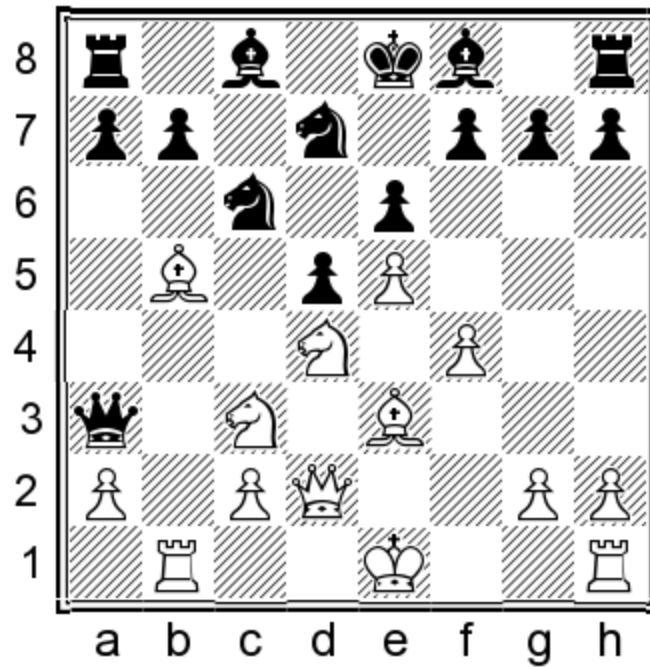


*Position after: 17.Ne8+- **B2)** 13...Bxe3! and there is only a perpetual. 14.Nxe6+ fxe6 15.Qe8+ Kg7 16.Qe7+ Kg8=*

**9...Qxb2**

Of course one must accept the challenge head on.

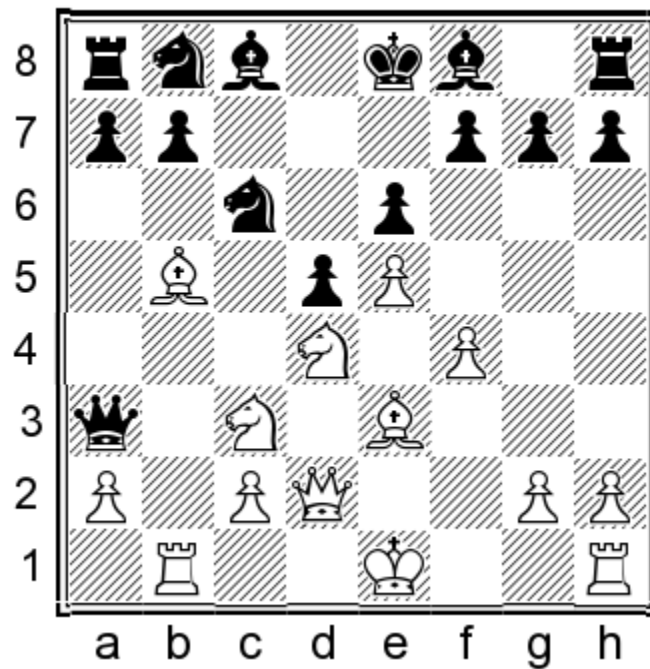
**10.Rb1 Qa3 11.Bb5!**



*Position after: 11.Bb5!*

This is without any discussion the first very important move that has to be remembered. Putting pressure onto Black's pieces is essential, otherwise White would have little to show for the missing pawn.

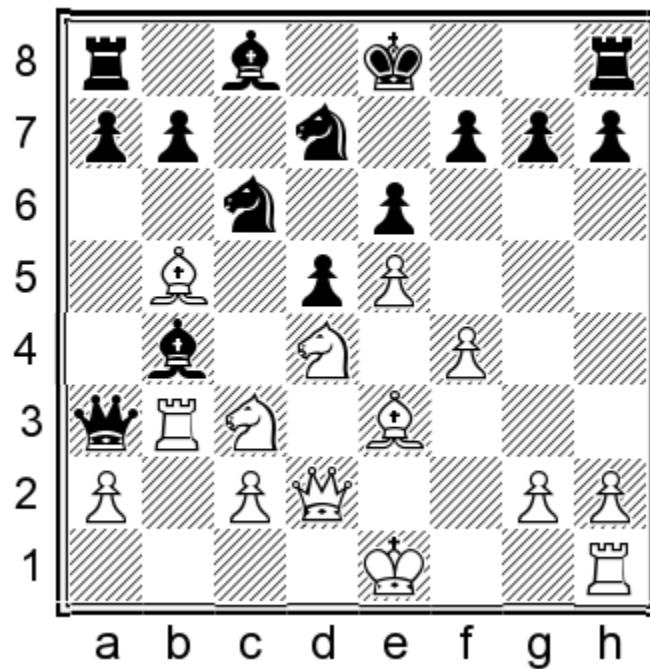
At first glance it does not seem that 11...Ndb8?!



*Position after: 11...Ndb8?!*

is completely bad, as cementing the c6-knight certainly has some sense. It should not be surprising that undeveloping one's knight like that makes White's task pretty easy, though.

11...Bb4 returns the pawn and leads to a miserable endgame for Black by force. 12.Rb3



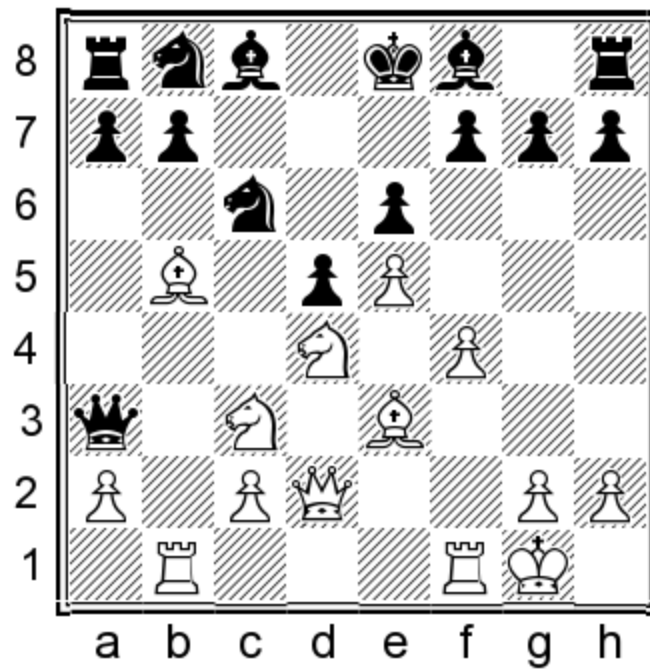
*Position after: 12.Rb3*

12...Qa5 [Snatching the a-pawn as well is a bit too much and after 12...Bxc3 13.Qxc3 Qxa2 14.0-0 Black has to either part with their queen or a whole piece. 14...Qa5 15.Bxc6 Qxc3 16.Bxd7++-] 13.Bxc6 bxc6 14.Nxc6 Bxc3 15.Nxa5 Bxd2+ 16.Kxd2± Black still needs to develop their pieces and the a-pawn is chronically weak.

## **12.Rb3**

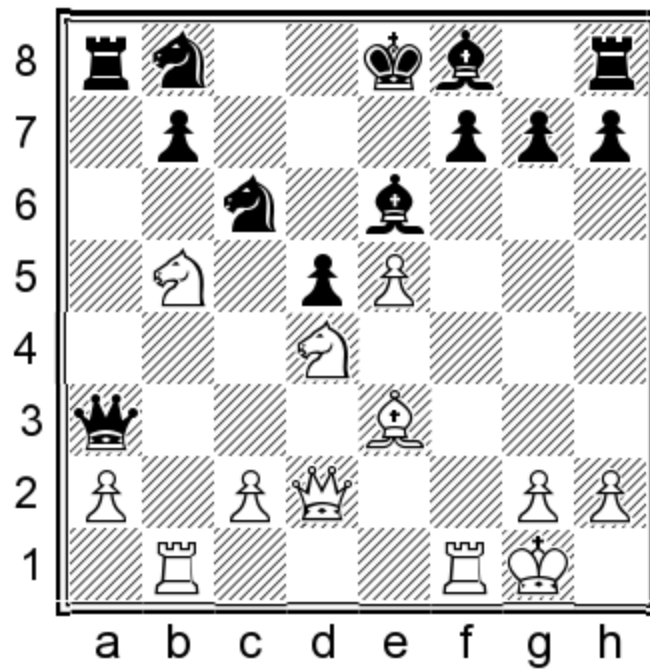
This is the most straightforward approach. On the other hand it is perfectly acceptable to opt for the simple 12.0-0!? instead.





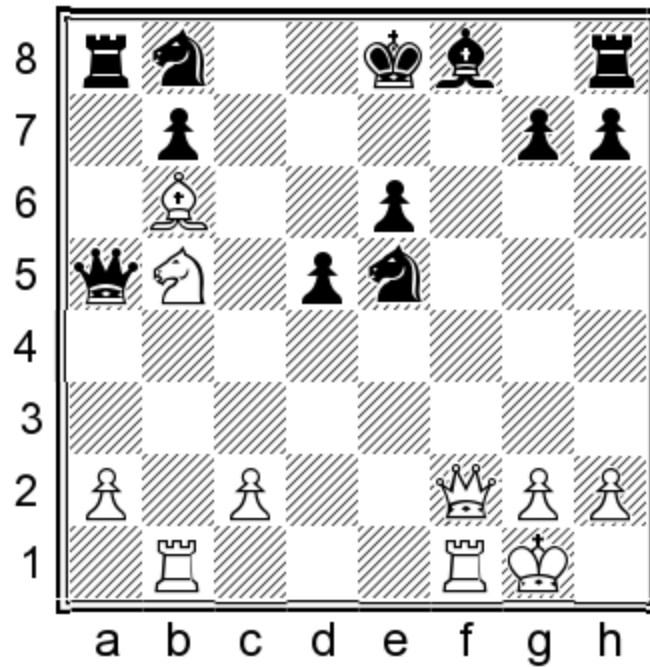
*Position after: 12.0-0!?*

**A)** White wants to push f5 and 12...a6 is unable to stop it either! 13.f5 axb5 14.fxe6 Bxe6 [14...fxe6 15.Ndxb5 Qa5 16.Qf2 and the check on f7 will be decisive.] 15.Ncxb5!



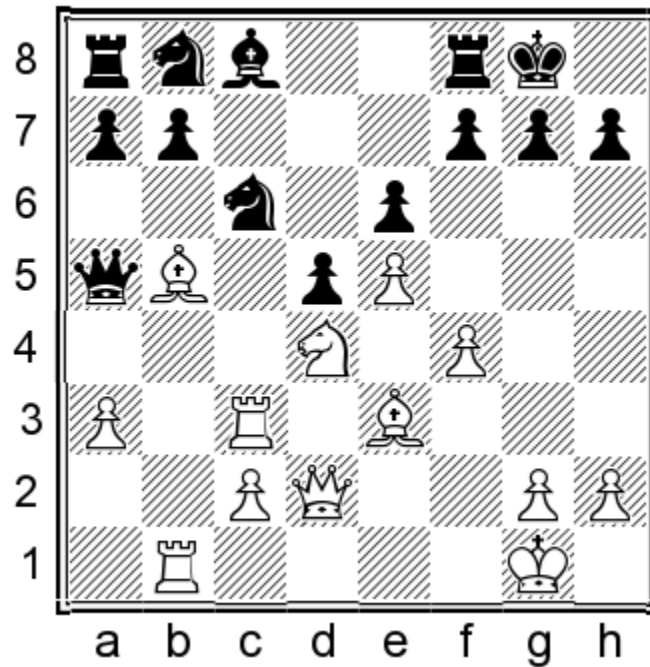
*Position after: 15.Ncxb5!*

It is quite important to start with this capture. 15...Qa5 [15...Qxa2 16.Nc7+ Kd7 17.Nxa8 Qxa8 18.c4!+- would have been a bit more problematic had White already taken on e6.] 16.Nxe6 fxe6 17.Qf2 and the fall of Black's position is inevitable – either a check on f7 or on c7 is coming after 17...Nxe5 18.Bb6.



*Position after: 18.Bb6*

**B)** 12...Bb4 13.Rb3 Qa5 14.a3 gives White a sizeable advantage. 14...Bxc3 [14...Bc5 15.f5!?f is incredibly dangerous.] 15.Rxc3 0-0 16.Rb1!



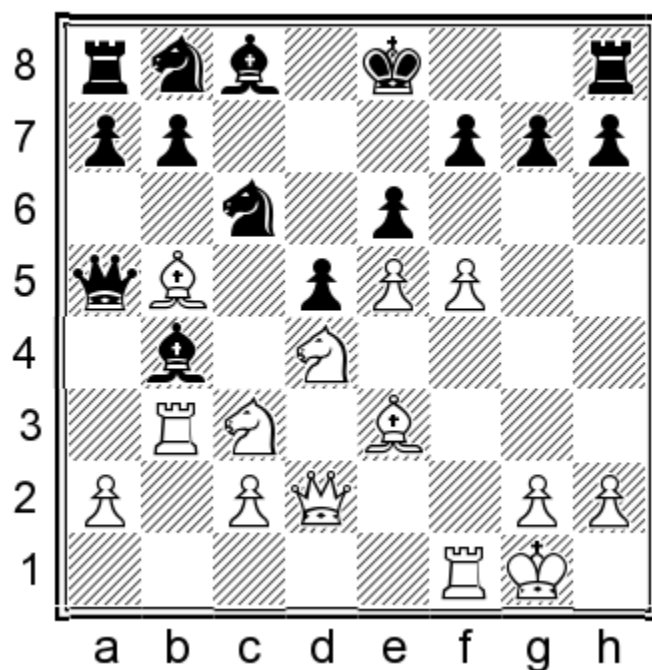
*Position after: 16.Rb1!*

with typical compensation – White’s bishops are incredibly strong. The last move was quite important as it protects the bishop and keeps the capture on c6 as an option.

Furthermore, after ...a6 Black’s queen might potentially be trapped with Bb6. And the simplifying 16...Nxd4

17.Bxd4 Nc6 does not work due to 18.Bxc6 bxc6 19.f5 exf5 20.e6! Bxe6 21.Bxg7! Kxg7 22.Rg3++-.

**12...Qa5 13.f5 Bb4 14.0-0**



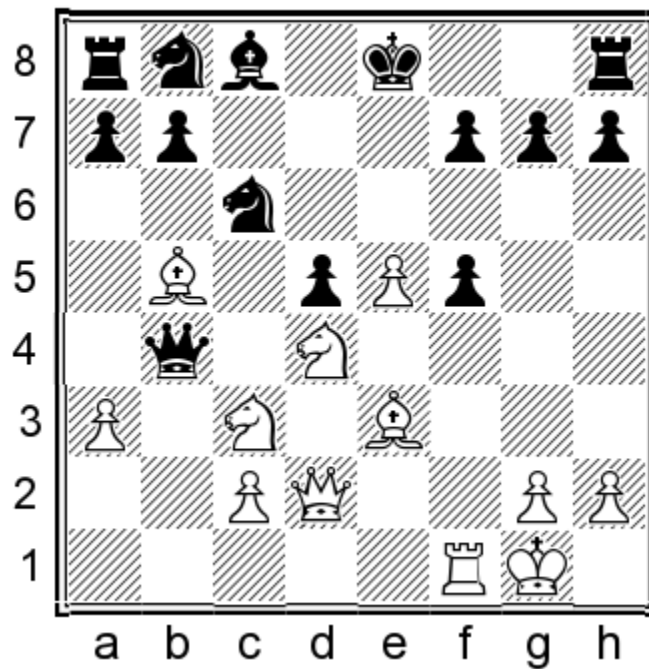
*Position after: 14.0-0*

### **14...exf5**

Greediness is Black's only hope. This whole set-up has actually already been played several times, most notably in Dreev - Vallejo Pons, Dos Hermanas 2003.

14...a6 15.Bxc6+ Nxc6 16.Nxc6 bxc6 17.f6 g6 18.Rfb1 leads to a dark-squared nightmare for Black. 18...c5 19.a3 Bxc3 20.Rxc3 d4 21.Bxd4 cxd4 22.Rxc8+!+- is a nice touch, but just to illustrate how terrible Black's position was already, 22.Qxd4 was winning as well!

### **15.Rxb4! Qxb4 16.a3**



*Position after: 16.a3*

### **16...Qa5**

Desperately trying to protect the d5-pawn, albeit indirectly.

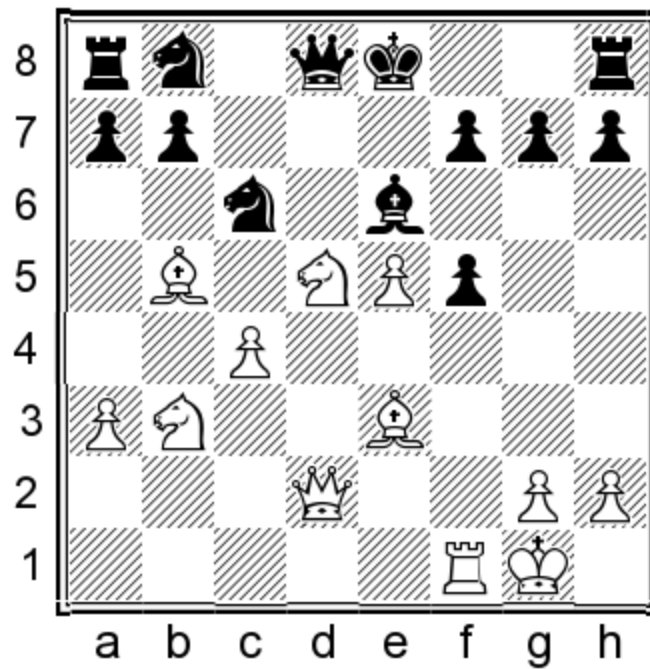
16...Qb2 17.Na4 will lose the queen soon since 17...Qxa3

18.Nxc6 bxc6 19.Bc5 Qa2 20.Qg5!+- is mate in two!

### **17.Nb3 Qd8 18.Nxd5 Be6**

18...0-0 19.Bg5 is a much worse version of the same thing.

### **19.c4**



*Position after: 19.c4*

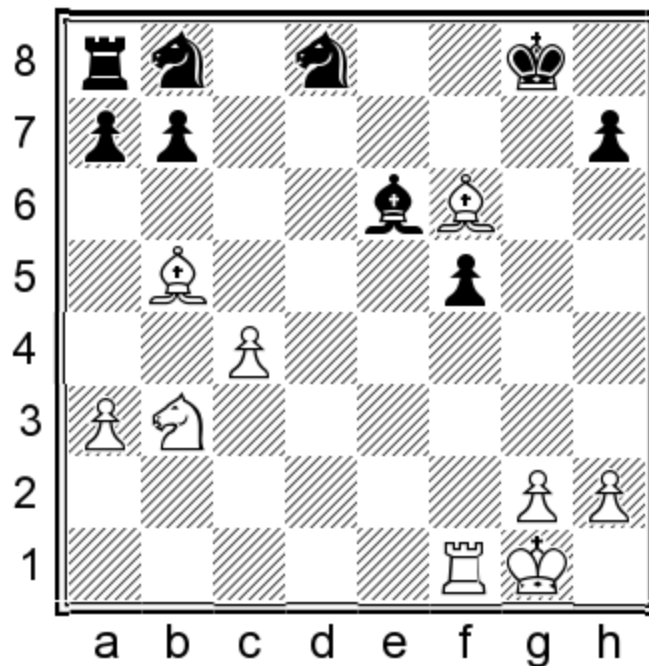
Eventually Black will have to part with their material advantage after Bg5, in exchange for finishing their development.

### **19...0-0**

Black should castle while they have a chance to do so.

19...h6 20.Na5 Qc8 21.Bc5+- 20.Bg5 f6 21.exf6 gxf6

22.Nxf6+ Rxf6 23.Qxd8+ Nxd8 24.Bxf6



*Position after: 24.Bxf6*

with a horrible endgame.

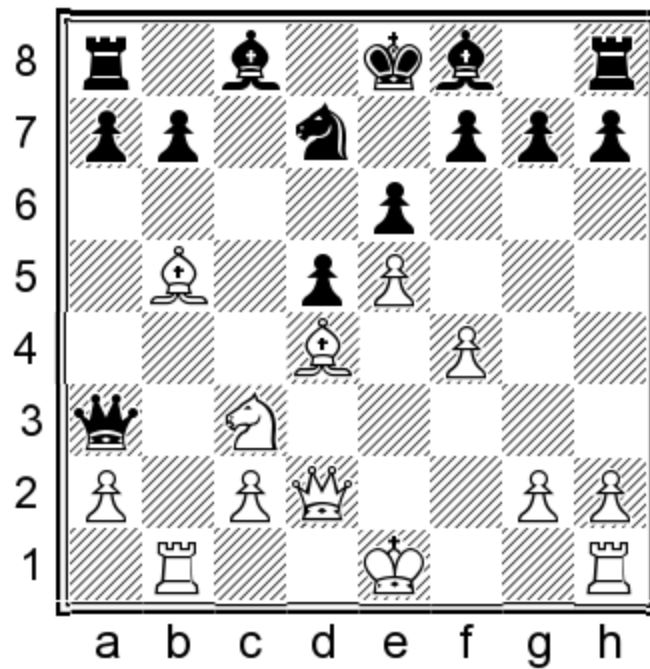
**b) 12...Bb4 13.0-0! 0-0**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5! Nxd4**

In practice it is most likely you will reach the tabiya after 15.Rxb7 described in subchapters d) and e), unless your opponent has been living under a rock for the last couple of decades. The principled road is quite narrow here, and Black has to actively fight against the threats of Nxc6 or f4-f5.

**12.Bxd4**





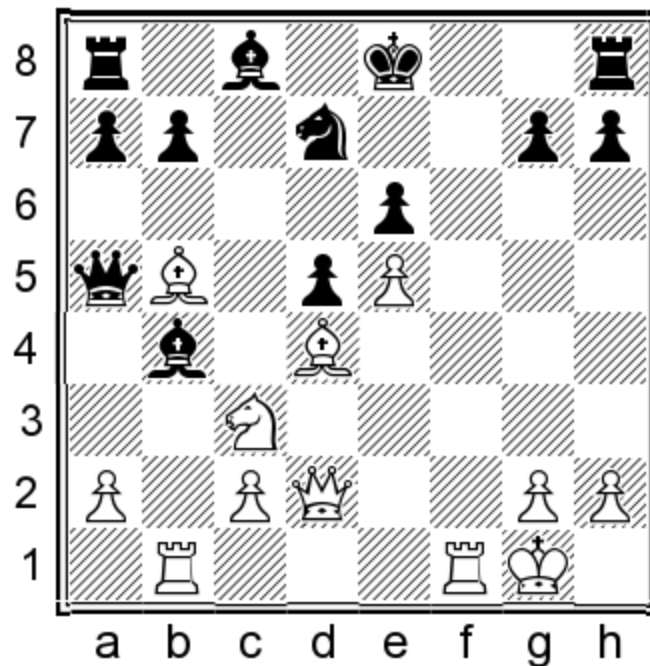
*Position after: 12.Bxd4*

As always,

**12...Bb4**

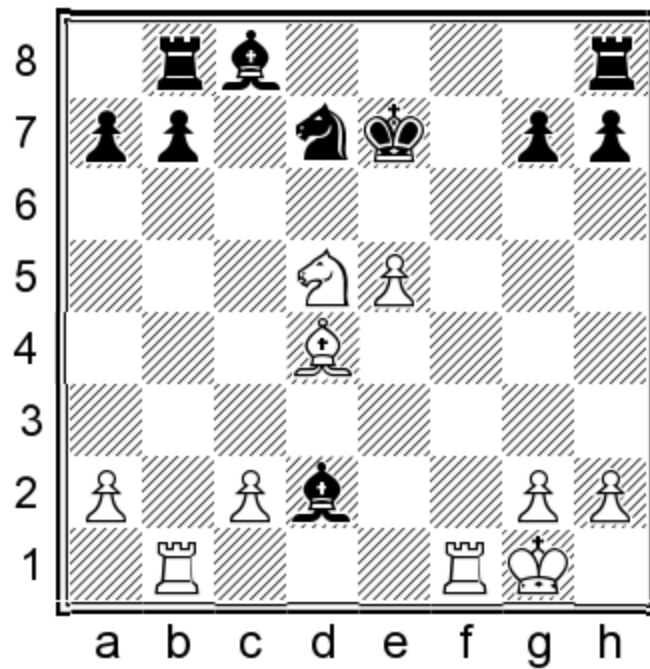
is not Black's best treatment of the position, and White has several good ways to approach it.

12...Qa5 once again solves nothing due to 13.f5! Bb4  
14.fxe6 fxe6 15.0-0!.



*Position after: 15.0-0!*

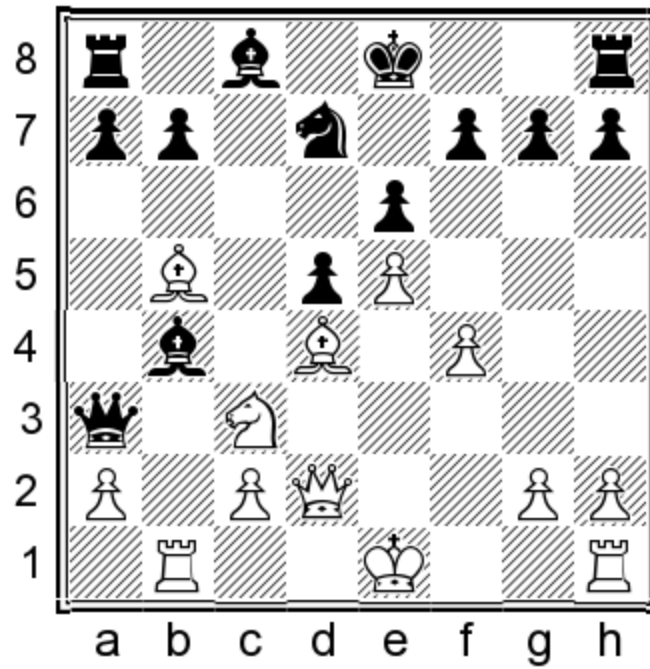
White's position is overwhelming especially if you look at it when your computer is doing all the work for you, however it is always nice to investigate a bit further. 15...Qxb5 16.Nxb5 Bxd2 17.Nc7+ Kd8 18.Nxe6+! [It is too early for 18.Nxa8 b6 when the outcome is far from clear.] 18...Ke7 19.Nc7 Rb8 [After 19...Kd8 20.Nxa8 b6 21.e6 we have a much improved version of 18.Nxa8, and White is simply better after 21...Nc5 22.Bxc5 bxc5 23.Rf7+-.] 20.Nxd5+



*Position after: 20.Nxd5+*

20...Ke6 [20...Kd8 21.Rbd1! with killer threats along the d-file; or 20...Ke8 21.Bxa7 Ra8 22.Nc7++- are simply too much for Black to handle.] 21.Nc7+ Ke7 22.Bxa7±

Although materially Black might not be doing so badly, their uncoordinated pieces will stand no chance against White's rooks and pawns. In fact Black's position seems to be on the verge of losing already.

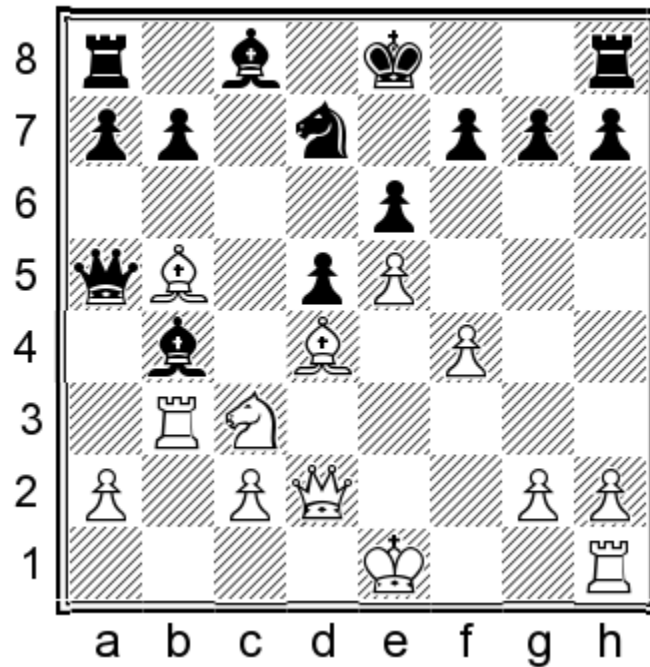


*Position after: 12...Bb4*

### **13.0-0!**

This is, in my opinion, the best move order you can choose here.

13.Rb3 is the usual reaction to ...Bb4, and after 13...Qa5



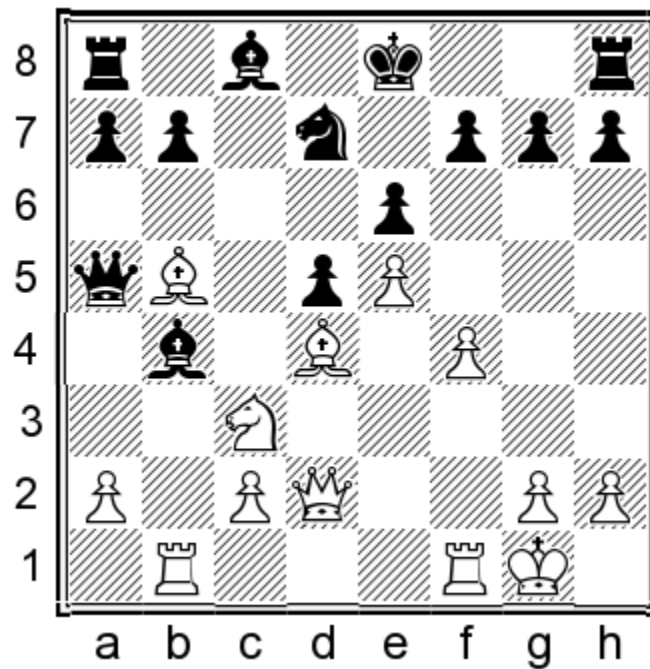
*Position after: 13...Qa5*

**A)** If you feel like conducting some research yourselves, feel free to explore 14.a3. White has been quite successful here recently and I feel they should be able to claim an edge as well, but perhaps we can avoid Black's dodgy ideas altogether.

**B)** 14.0-0 Qxb5 is an extra option we can avoid if we start with 13.0-0.

**13...0-0**

13...Qa5

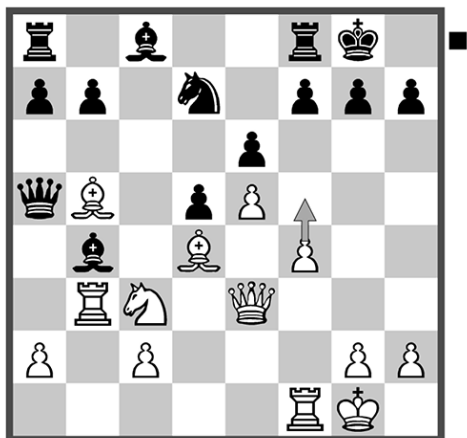


*Position after: 13...Qa5*

This move, threatening ...Qxb5, can be answered with 14.f5 [or you can simply feed the fish with 14.a3 Qxa3, and from a practical point of view White is two tempi up in their attack, since the a2-pawn is completely irrelevant in this position. 15.Qe3,] 14...Qxb5 15.fxe6 fxe6 16.Nxb5, transposing to the 12...Qa5 line analyzed.

Only after Black castles is it time to play our standard maneuver.

**14.Rb3 Qa5 15.Qe3**

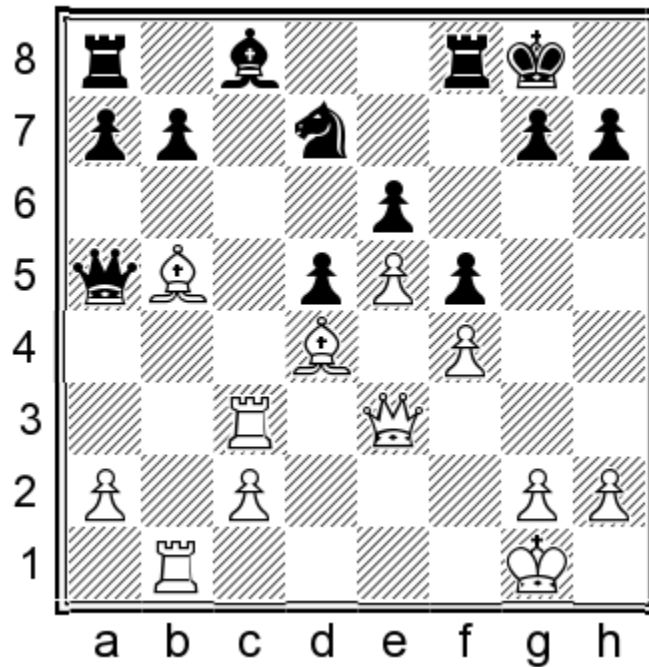


*Position after: 15.Qe3*

Since we have already managed to move the whole royal family away from the a5-e1 diagonal and ...Qxb5 is no longer a problem, f4-f5 is the next move on White's agenda.

### **15...Nb6**

In principle Black cannot do much to stop White's kingside advance because they are already lagging so far behind in their development. For example, 15...f5 16.Rfb1 Bxc3 17.Rxc3.



*Position after: 17.Rxc3*

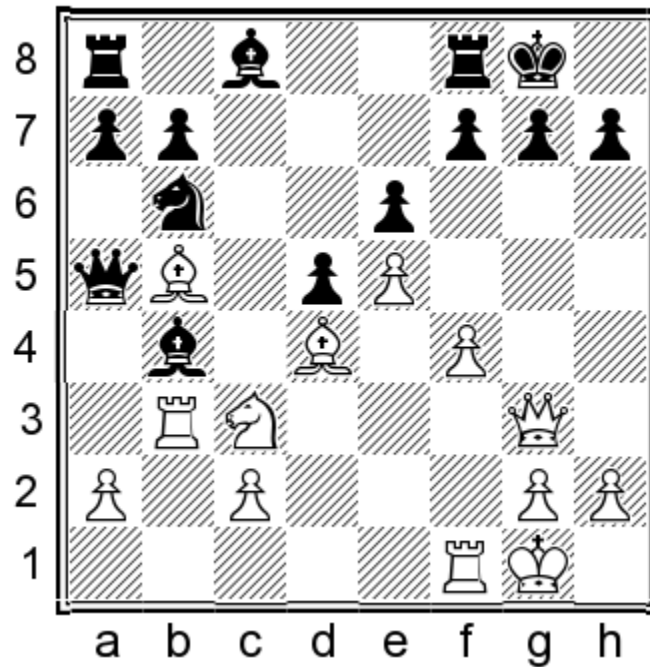
It is fair to say that even in the endgame after 17.Qxc3 Black would be in deep trouble, but we should aim for the maximum. 17...Qd8 Desperately trying to get ...Nb6 in without Black's queen getting trapped. 18.Ra3! a6 19.Be2± Now there will be no ...Nb6 happening any time soon, and while Black is awkwardly solving their development issues, White will seek to quickly crack the position open with c2-c4.

### **16.Qg3!**

Patience. With another piece eyeing Black's king the threat of f5 is looming.

Do not rush with 16.f5?! since after 16...exf5 it might be not so easy to recover the invested material.

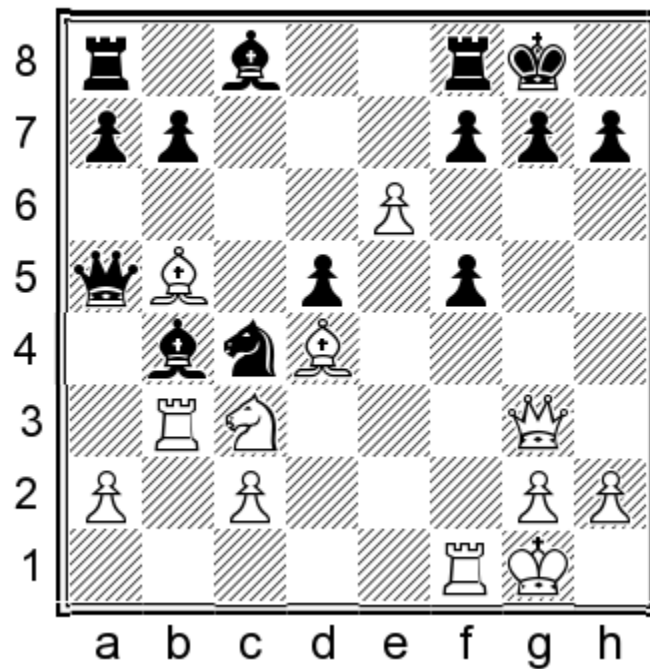




*Position after: 16.Qg3!*

### **16...Rd8**

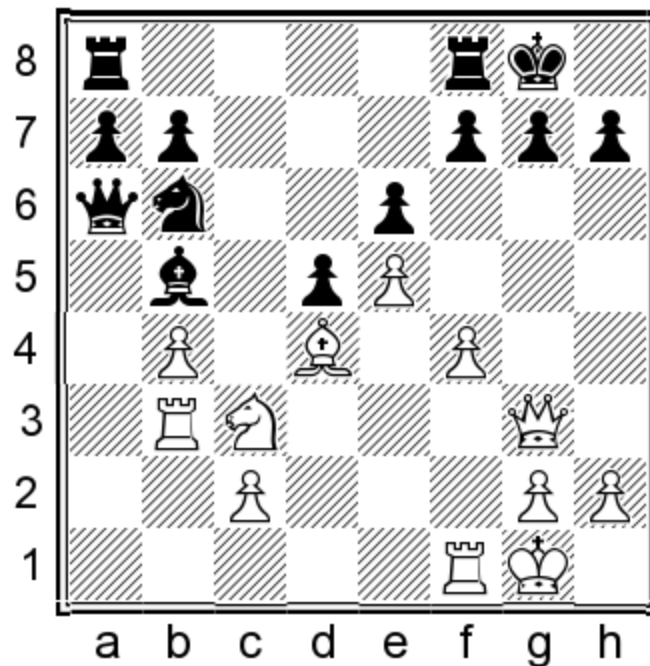
**A)** Swiss international master Beat Zueger has stubbornly defended this position thrice in the past, however even in the pre-computer era it was not difficult for his opponents to prove the objective evaluation – Black’s position is basically unplayable. 16...Nc4 17.f5 exf5 [17...Rd8 transposes below and it was the actual move order in two of Zueger’s games too.] 18.e6!



*Position after: 18.e6!*

This is the whole point of the move Qg3 – White’s bishop suddenly comes to life. 18...f6 19.Rxb4! Qxb4 20.e7 Qxe7 21.Nxd5+- And that’s all she wrote. White either gets the c4-knight or the f6-pawn, Pavasovic – Zueger, Portoroz 1998.

**B)** 16...Bd7 is losing by force though a we need to be precise. 17.a3! [17.f5 Bxb5 18.f6 g6 19.Nxb5 Rfc8! can be analyzed further but it is a bit unclear.] 17...Bxb5 18.axb4 Qa6



*Position after: 18...Qa6*

Here simply capturing the b5-bishop and building up the kingside attack more slowly should work too, but I could not resist showing the following brilliant idea. 19.f5! Bxf1 20.f6 g6 21.Qg5 Kh8 22.Nb5!!+- with a decisive attack. White's knight is taboo because of checkmate along the h-file and if Black somehow miraculously manages to stop the threatened mate in three, they will be finished by the knight arriving on the lovely d6-square.

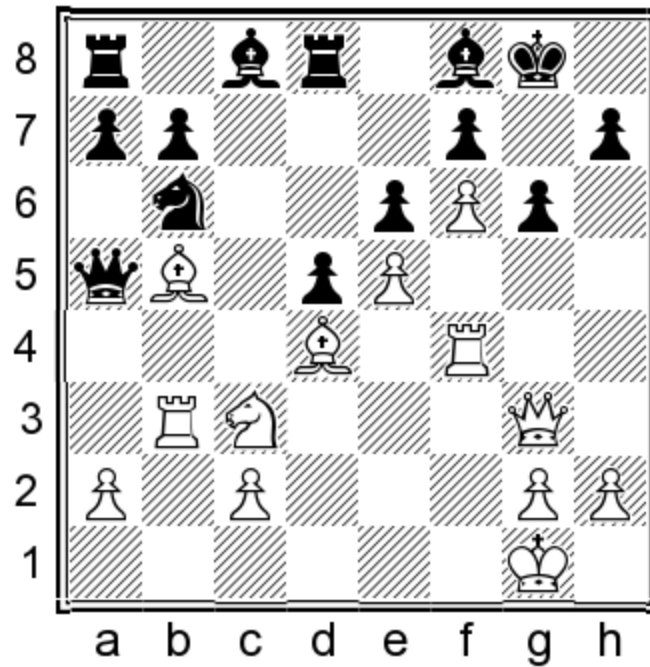
### **17.f5 Bf8**

17...Nc4 is essentially the same thing and will transpose after 18.Rf4! Bf8 19.f6 g6.

### **18.f6**

White's attack is running flawlessly.

**18...g6 19.Rf4**

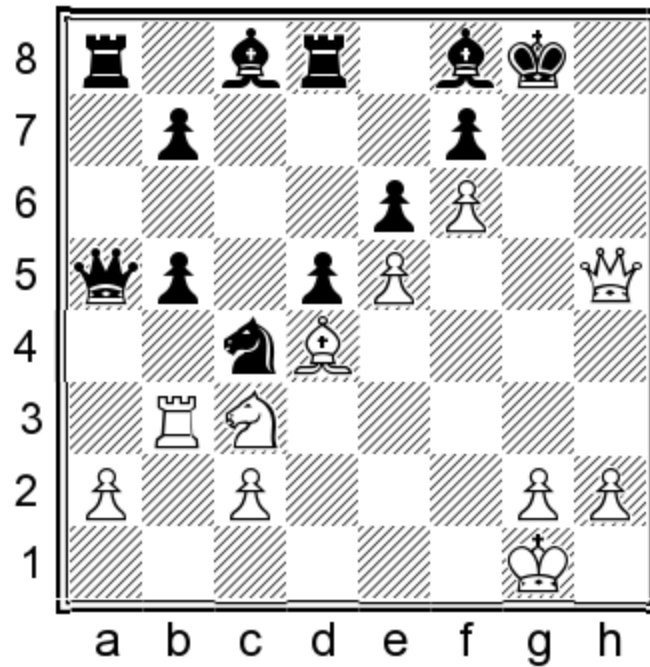


*Position after: 19.Rf4*

**19...Nc4**

19...Bd7 is just forcing White's bishop to a better, more aggressive post. 20.Bd3 Bc5 21.Rh4 Bxd4+ 22.Kh1!+- Why bother recapturing when White's threat of Rxh7 is basically unstoppable, e.g. 22...Bc5 23.Rxh7 Kxh7 24.Bxg6+ fxg6 25.Qh4+ Kg8 26.Qh6 Bf8 27.Qxg6+ Kh8 28.f7 and curtains.

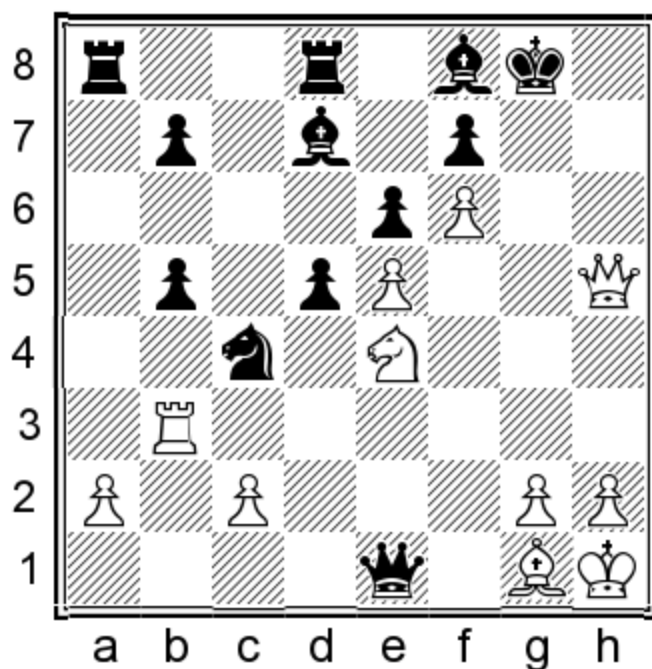
**20.Rh4 a6 21.Qh3 h5 22.Rxh5 gxh5 23.Qxh5 axb5**



*Position after: 23...axb5*

was another practical try which did not work out well for Black, although White missed the immediate killer 24.Kh1!! in Rechlis - Zueger, Ohrid 2001. The point is that White makes room for bishop, which will drop back to protect the

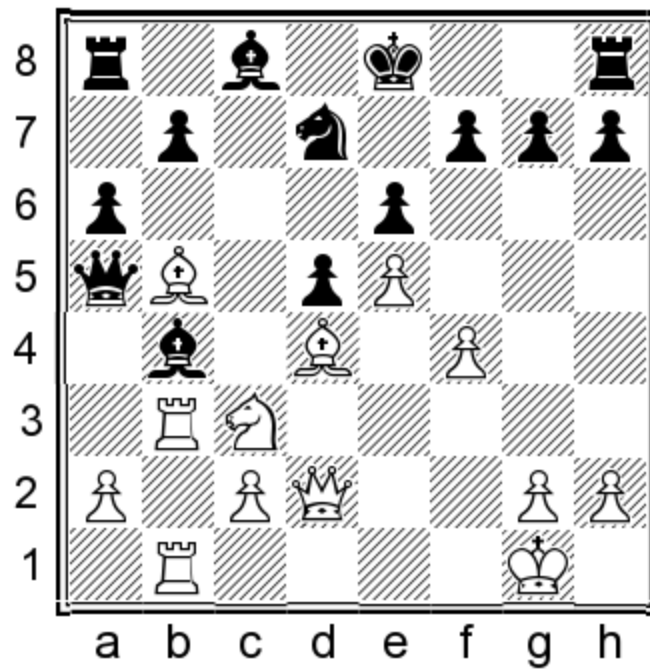
first rank after, say, 24...Bd7 25.Ne4! Qe1+ 26.Bg1+-



*Position after: 26.Bg1+- when Black cannot stop both Rh3 and Ng5 at once.*

**c) 12...Bb4 13.0-0! a6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5! Nxd4 12.Bxd4 Bb4 13.0-0! a6 14.Rb3 Qa5  
15.Rfb1!**

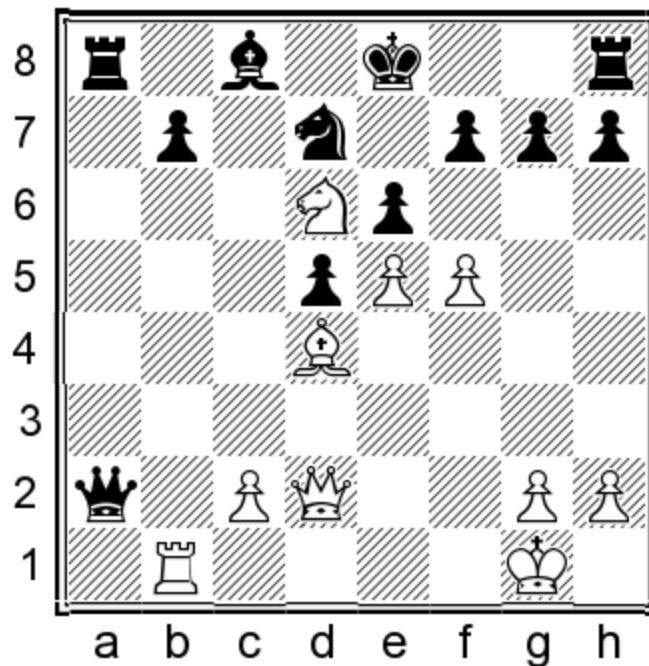


*Position after: 15.Rfb1!*

### 15...Be7

**A)** 15...Qxb5 16.Rxb4! Qc6 17.f5!,, with Qg5 to come next leads to another dark-squared apocalypse for Black.

**B)** 15...Ba3 is another position historically defended by IM Zueger. It seems almost nobody ventured into this line after the game Timoshenko - Itkis, Herculane 1996. 16.f5! axb5 17.Rxa3! Qxa3 18.Nxb5 Qxa2 19.Nd6+



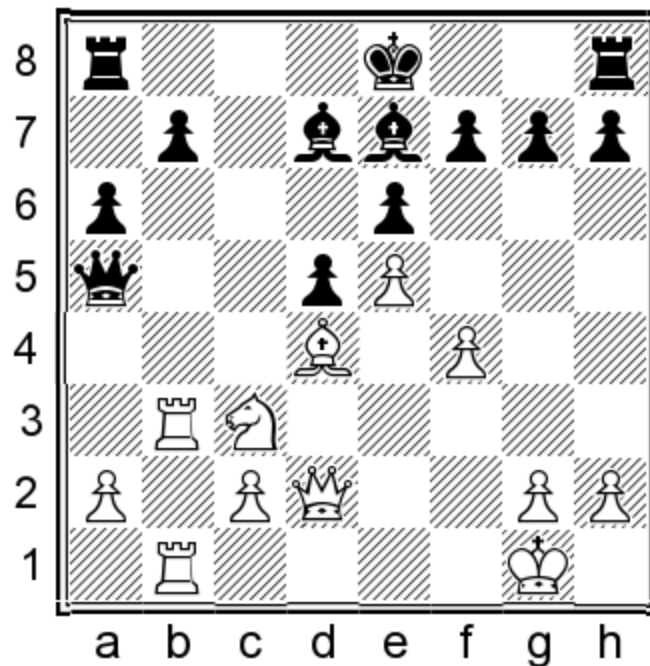
*Position after: 19.Nd6+*

**B1)** 19...Kf8 20.Rf1! is a move which was missed in the aforementioned game (White eventually won after 20.Ra1). Nevertheless, it can be said that White players in this line have done quite a decent analytical job, essentially refuting it without any engine support at all. 20...Kg8 [20...Qa5 21.Qg5+-] 21.fxe6 fxe6 22.Qg5 h6 23.Qg6 Qa4 24.c3+- There is no cure for Ne8.

**B2)** 19...Kd8! 20.Qd1! Here we just collect material. 20...Rf8 21.Ra1 Qxa1 22.Bxa1+- Materially it might look not so bad for Black, but if we take into account positional factors as well, then their position is in ruins.

**16.Bxd7+ Bxd7**





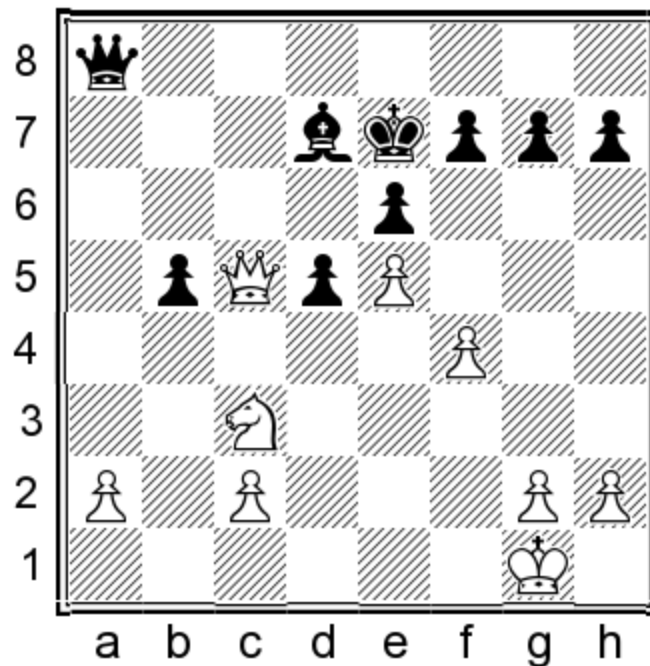
*Position after: 16...Bxd7*

It seems White players are struggling to find the best continuation here since even Topalov's seconds Cheparinov and Edouard have not been able to punish Black for their risky play recently.

### **17.Qe3!**

Black needs to solve the threat of their queen being trapped with Bb6.

17.Rxb7 is the most popular move and the following endgame should ensue almost by force: 17...Bc5 18.Rb8+ Ke7 19.R1b5 Bxd4+ 20.Qxd4 Qa3 21.Rxh8 axb5 22.Rxa8 Qxa8 23.Qc5+

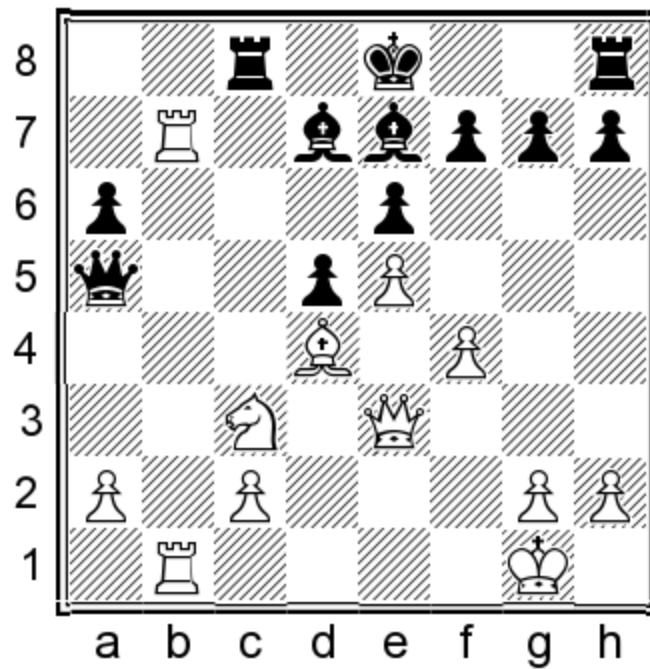


*Position after: 23.Qc5+*

Now both king moves have led to successful defense in correspondence games. Probably the most annoying fact is that a booked-up opponent can even go for 23...Ke8 24.Nxb5 Bxb5 25.Qxb5+ Kf8 and make a draw in a pawn-down endgame. While it is quite an inglorious strategy for playing chess, we should not encourage Black players to follow the theory, and we should choose something more fruitful in the first place.

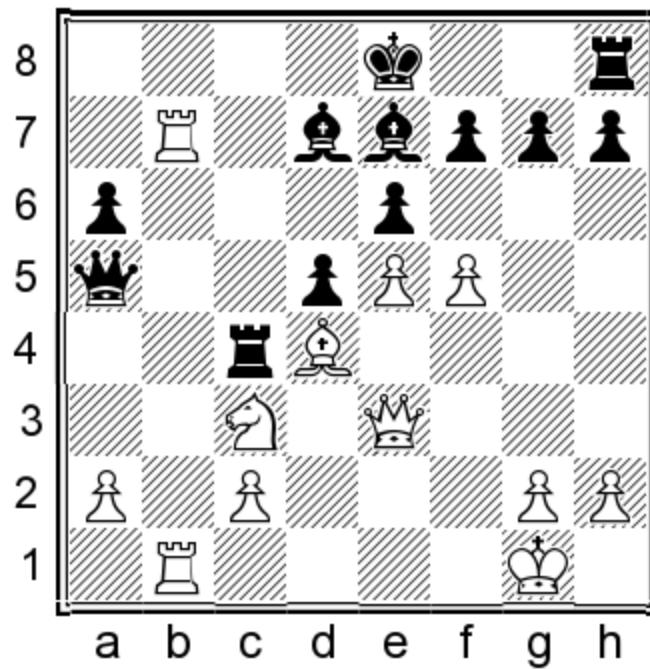
### **17...Qd8**

17...Rc8 is the other logical move but after 18.Rxb7



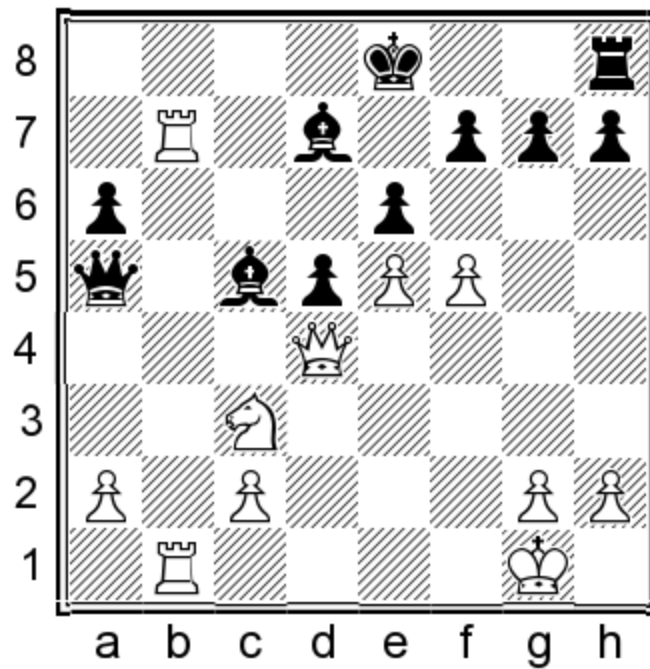
*Position after: 18.Rxb7*

Black's king is much more vulnerable due to the queen's absence in its defense. 18...Rc4 [18...Bc5 falls for the "*petit combination*" 19.Nb5! when White immediately recovers the sacrificed piece on c5 with total dark-squared dominance.] 19.f5! It is not very surprising that Black's tries for counterplay in an open fight are predestined to fail miserably since their kingside is still half asleep.



*Position after: 19.f5!*

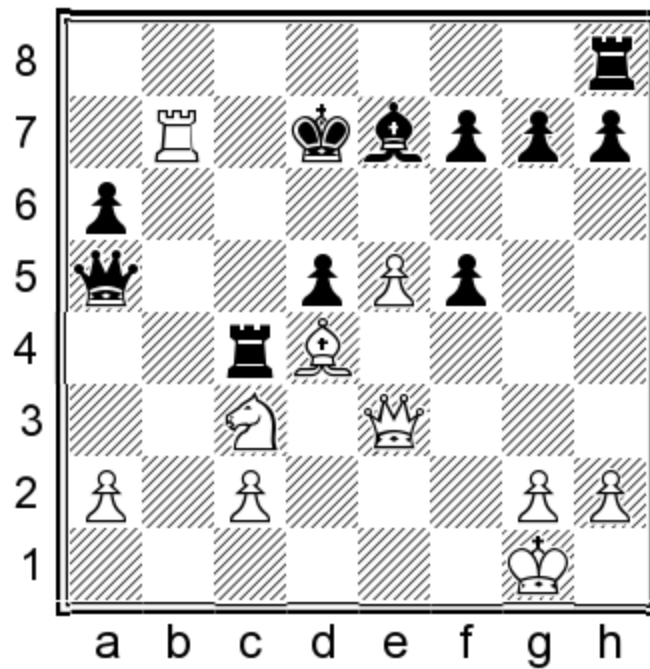
**A)** There is no need to worry about 19...Rxd4? with the idea of pinning White's queen with ...Bc5. Even if White did not have the handy Rb8+ Zwischenzug at their disposal, tactics are not working in the defender's favor at all: 20.Qxd4 Bc5



*Position after: 20...Bc5*

21.Rb8+ Ke7 22.f6+ gxf6 23.exf6+ Kd6 24.Ne4++-.

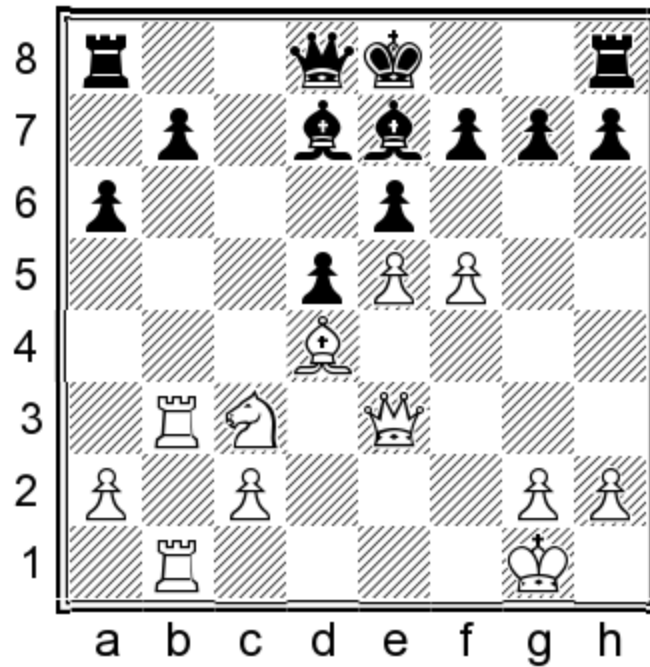
**B)** 19...exf5 20.Rxd7! As a matter of fact any reasonable move like 20.Ra7, 20.Rb8+, or even 20.e6 should do the job. The text move is the most effective one though.  
20...Kxd7 21.Rb7+



*Position after: 21.Rb7+*

21...Ke8 [21...Ke6 22.Rb6++- with e5-e6 to follow is no better.; Black's king cannot bring the rook back into defense with 21...Rc7 due to 22.Bb6+-, winning material immediately.] 22.e6!+- White will force open the e-file and Black, essentially playing without the h8-rook, is doomed.

**18.f5!**



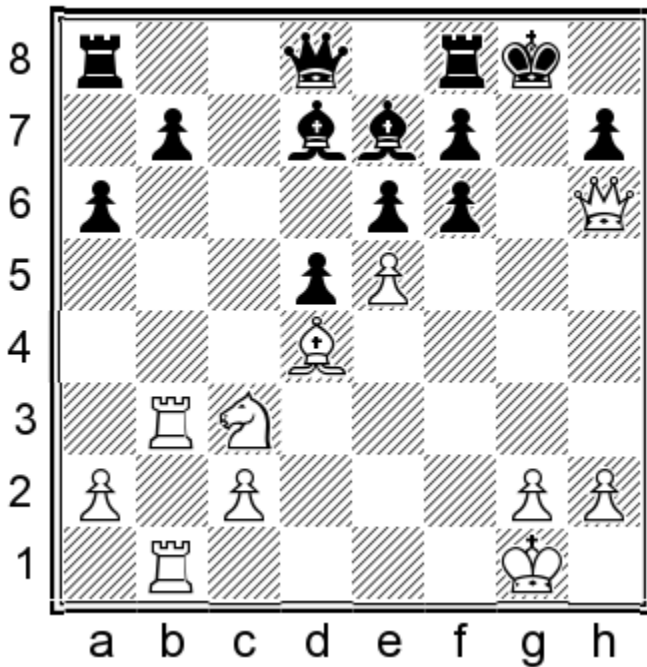
*Position after: 18.f5!*

Since Black is ready to castle, we have to hurry with f4-f5.

### **18...Bc6**

Under given circumstances this is the only move which gives Black some hope of not losing in the next 10 moves.

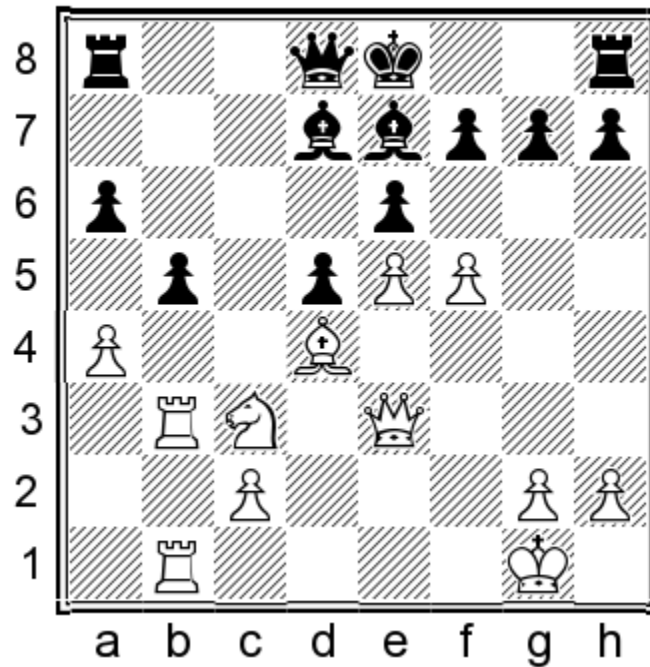
**A)** Way too much time has been wasted for 18...0-0? to slip away unpunished. 19.f6! gxf6 20.Qh6+-



*Position after: 20.Qh6+- With the b3-rook joining the attack via g3 or h3 after sacrificing the c3-knight, the game is simply over.*

**B)** 18...b5?! fails to stop the onslaught since the defensive ranks will be leaking heavily after 19.a4!. Castling is still impossible due to f5-f6, the b5-pawn is hanging, and [the tempting 19.f6 gxf6 20.Nxd5 Bc6 is not so clear without the weakening ...b4-move for Black.]



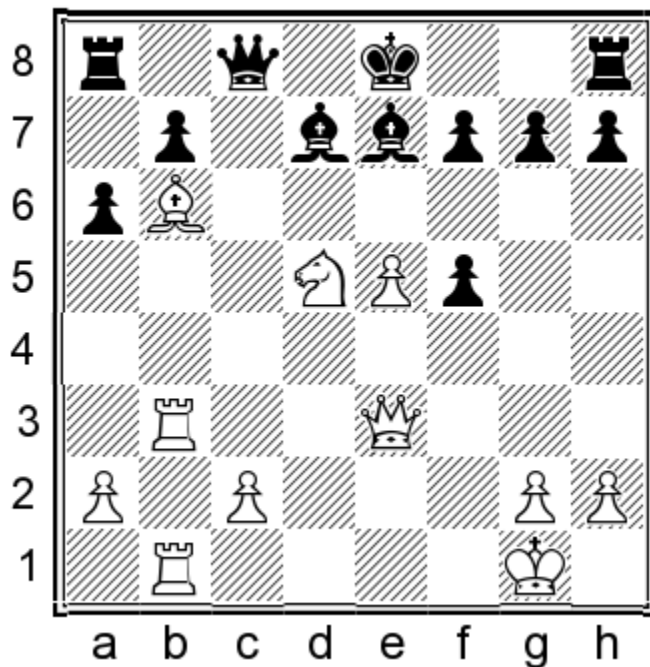


*Position after: 19.a4!*

19...b4 loses on the spot 20.f6! gxf6 21.Nxd5 Bc6 22.Nxe7 Qxe7 23.Bc5 when Black's position is collapsing.

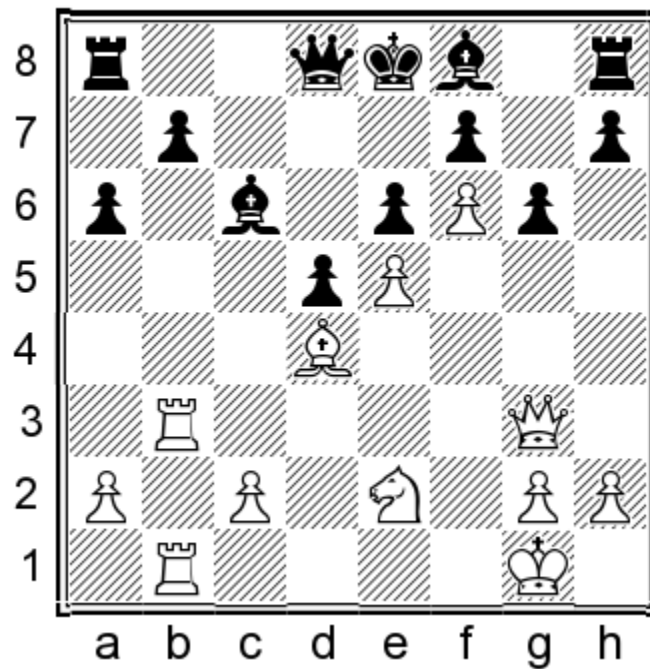
**C)** I have to say being able to time the f4-f5 push correctly is one of the greatest challenges for White in the French in general – and it is undoubtedly one of the most common causes for White's defeat. Here it can be justified by the fact that Black's queen is not protecting the d5-pawn

anymore, so 18...exf5 19.Bb6 Qc8 20.Nxd5+-



*Position after: 20.Nxd5+- is immediately over. However, one should not generalize too much and one should always pay extra attention to such chances.*

**19.Qg3 g6 20.f6 Bf8 21.Ne2<sup>2</sup>**

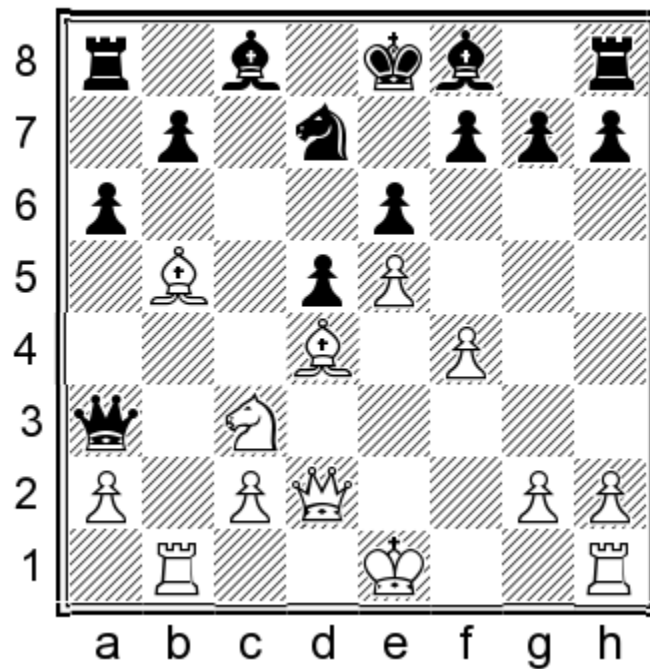


*Position after: 21.Ne2*

This, however, can hardly bring Black too much joy. The c6-bishop is Black's only developed piece, and they are suffering more generally from a lack of space to maneuver. It's true that it might not be so easy to crack the position, but White's play should be very simple – they will put their knight on d4 and maybe even increase their spatial advantage with pawn pushes like a4 or h4. Such a position is incredibly nasty to play even for the world's greatest defenders.

**d) 12...a6 & 16...Qa3**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5! Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6**

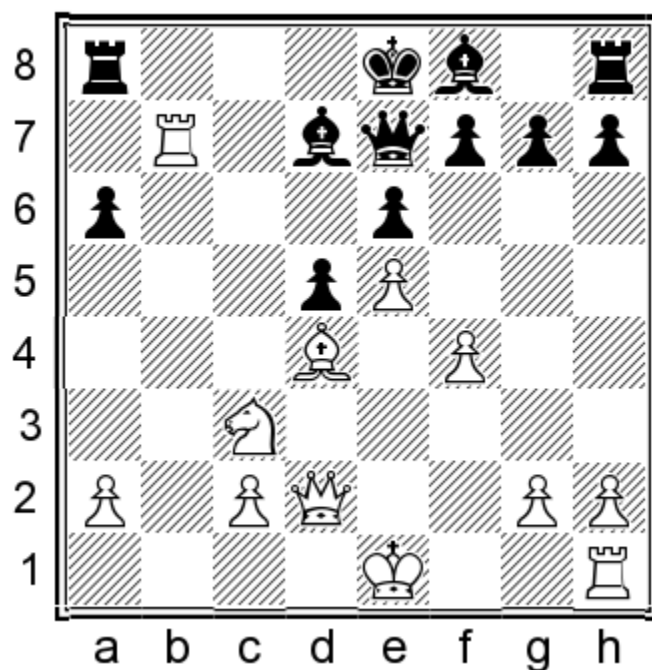


*Position after: 12...a6*

**13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3**

An important intermezzo, forcing Black's queen to an unfavorable square on e7, where it will be obstructing the development of Black's kingside.

**14...Qe7 15.Rxb7**

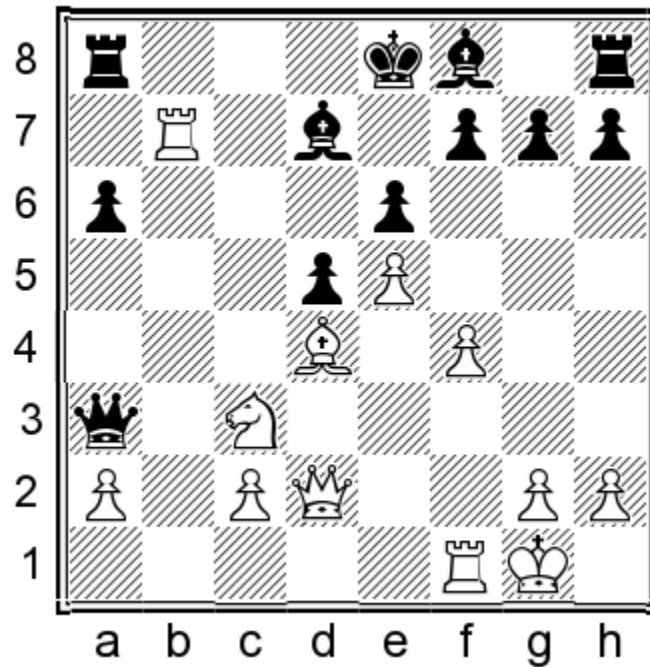


*Position after: 15.Rxb7*

There are three main options for Black here. In this chapter we are going to focus on the ...Rc8 systems. On the one hand, it is the most frequently played and it scores the best, yet on the other hand, I find it the easiest to play against. The queen moves 15...Qh4+ and 15...Qd8 require much more analytical work to be handled properly and so we will look at them separately in the next chapter.

### **15...Rc8**

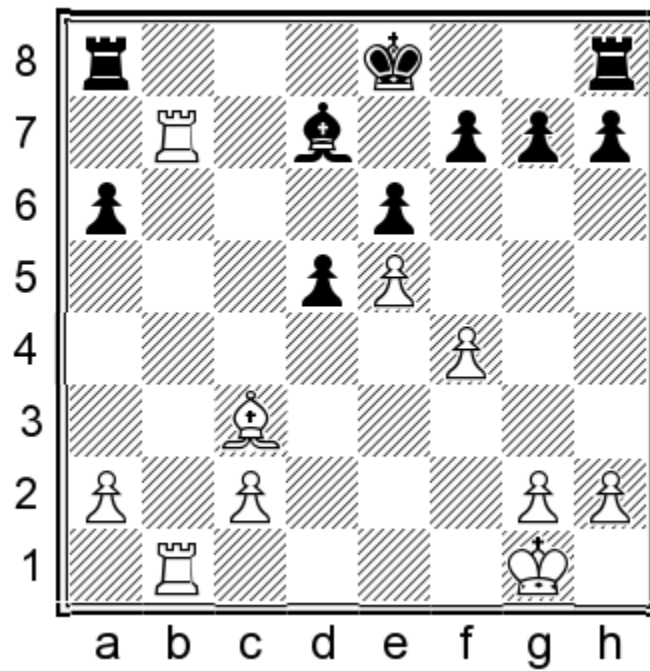
15...Qa3 has little independent value. 16.0-0 [16.Rb3!? Qe7 17.0-0 could be an even stronger solution as Black has lost time with the queen while White simply finishes their development and is ready to push f4-f5. The choice is yours!]



*Position after: 16.0-0*

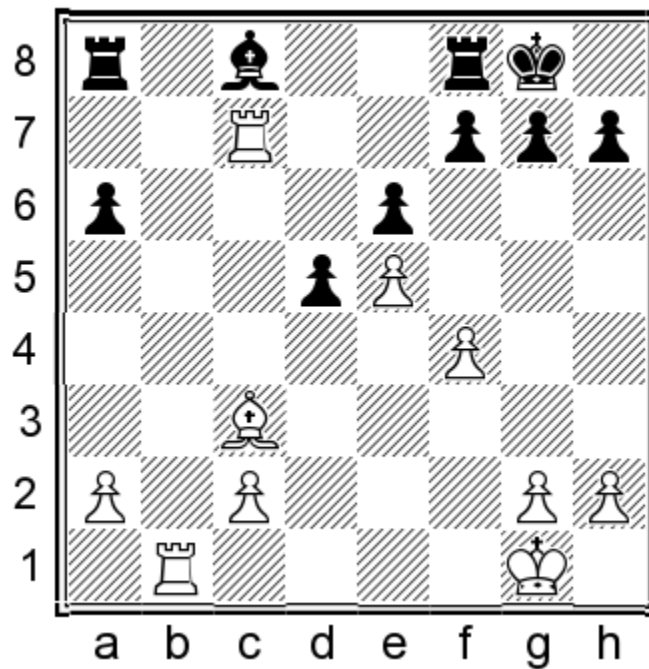
**A)** Black's best is to transpose into our text variation with 16...Rc8.

**B)** The only other sensible way of (indirectly) stopping White's threat of f4-f5 is 16...Bb4, however things are not looking rosy at all for the second player after 17.Rb1 Bxc3 18.Qxc3 Qxc3 19.Bxc3.



*Position after: 19.Bxc3*

Even in a rook and opposite-colored bishop endgame  
 Black is suffering quite a lot, for example 19...Bc8 [19...a5  
 20.R1b6 Bc8 21.Rc7 0-0 22.a4± is just a transposition to  
 below.] 20.Rc7 0-0

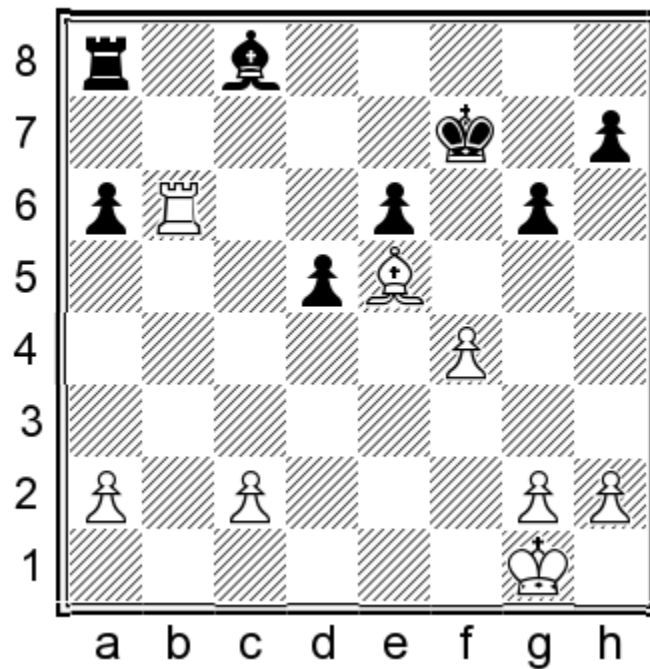


*Position after: 20...0-0*

**B1)** 21.Rb6 I would not be surprised if Black eventually ends up in Zugzwang since it is already almost impossible to suggest a sensible move for them. White intends to slowly improve their position, bringing the king closer to the center and then maybe even pushing the kingside pawns, eventually capitalizing on their tremendous activity by capturing (most likely) the a-pawn. The weakening move 21...a5 will always be answered with 22.a4±, fixing the weakness on a5, when Black has not really improved their situation.

**B2)** A different approach could be the blockading 21.Ba5 when Black cannot really free themselves: 21...f6 22.exf6 Rxf6 23.Bc3 Rf7 24.Rxf7 Kxf7 25.Be5 g6 26.Rb6<sup>2</sup>. This still looks quite annoying for the defender.





*Position after: 26.Rb6<sup>2</sup>*

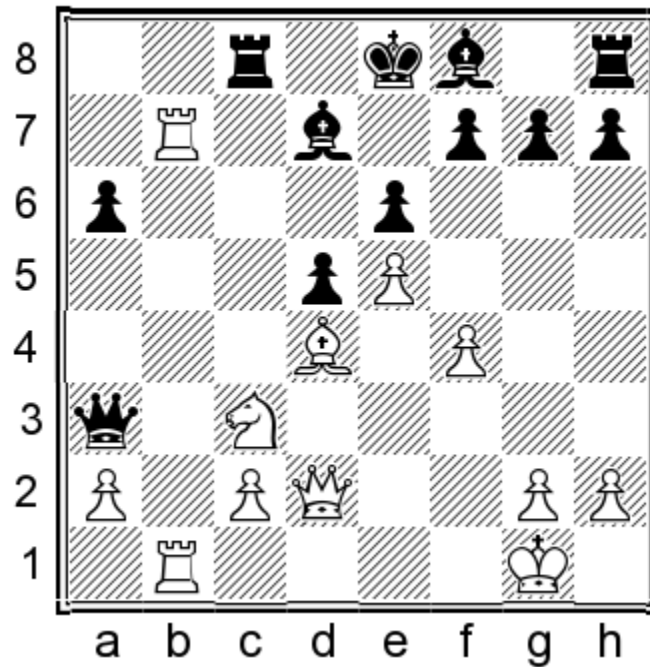
It is nice to see that any logical approach works out well for White, though I would like to keep more pieces on board.

## 16.0-0

White has been partially successful with 16.f5 here too, and the game Nepomniachtchi – Sutovsky, Poikovsky 2018, comes to mind especially. On closer inspection things are far from clear though, and I'd prefer to avoid being unnecessarily messy.

Black players seem to be equally divided between two queen moves here. Although White needs to be ready to face either of them, the theoretical load is not very heavy and they should be able to demonstrate a tangible edge without too much effort.

**16...Qa3 17.Rfb1!**



*Position after: 17.Rfb1!*

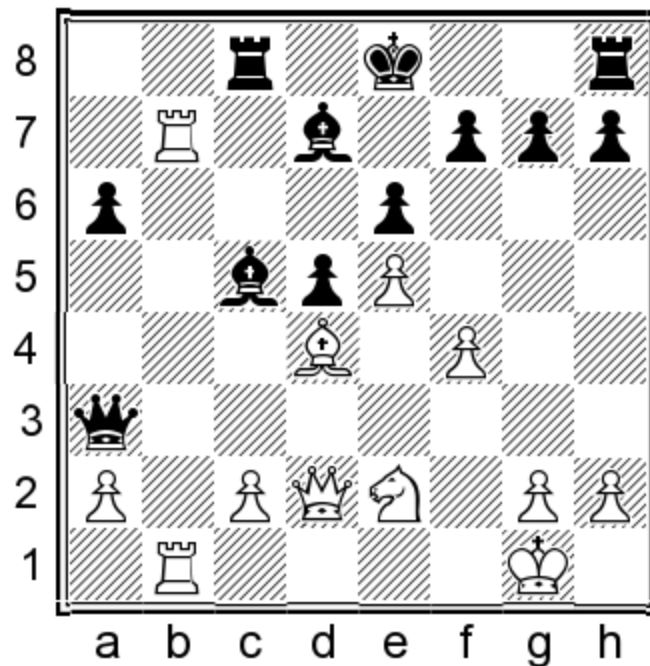
Once again we are a bit hesitant to play f4-f5. It is definitely a serious option to consider if you are not satisfied with the suggested lines but White's current theoretical status here is more than OK.

**17...Bc5**

Universally played.

17...Qa5 18.Qe3 Bc5 19.Nb5! is a trick you might remember seeing earlier and it is actually a direct transposition into the line with 12...Bb4.

**18.Ne2**



*Position after: 18.Ne2*

White is sorting out the immediate threat on the c-file, and at the same time their knight would happily be exchanged for the bishop on d4, where it would end up in a much better position.

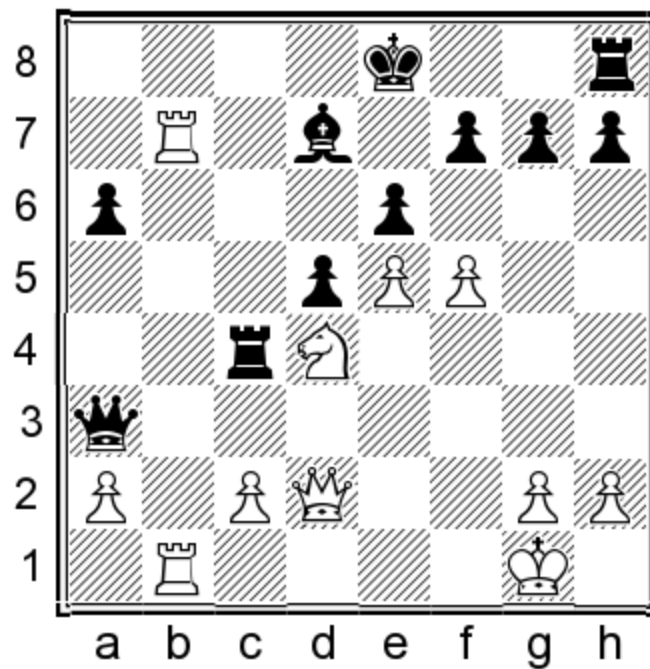
Black, on the other hand, now needs to do something about both their uncastled king's position and the ever-present threat of f5. Let's examine the various tries one by one.

### **18...h6**

Another move popularized by correspondence players, essentially saying "pass". Fortunately, there is little room for meaningless moves even in correspondence chess and Black's results have been mortifying.

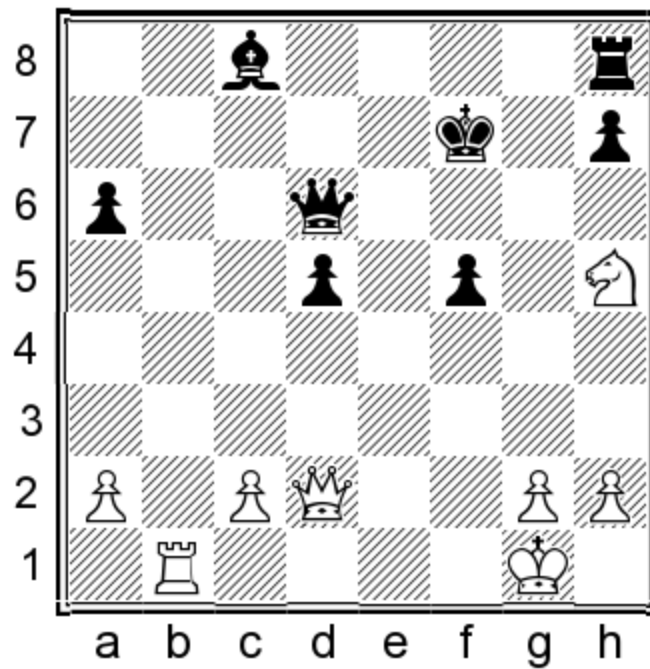
**A)** The super-greedy 18...Qxa2 19.Bxc5 Rxc5 20.f5! exf5 21.e6!+-, with Qd4 coming next, is carnage.

**B) 18...Bxd4+ 19.Nxd4 Rc4 20.f5!**



*Position after: 20.f5!*

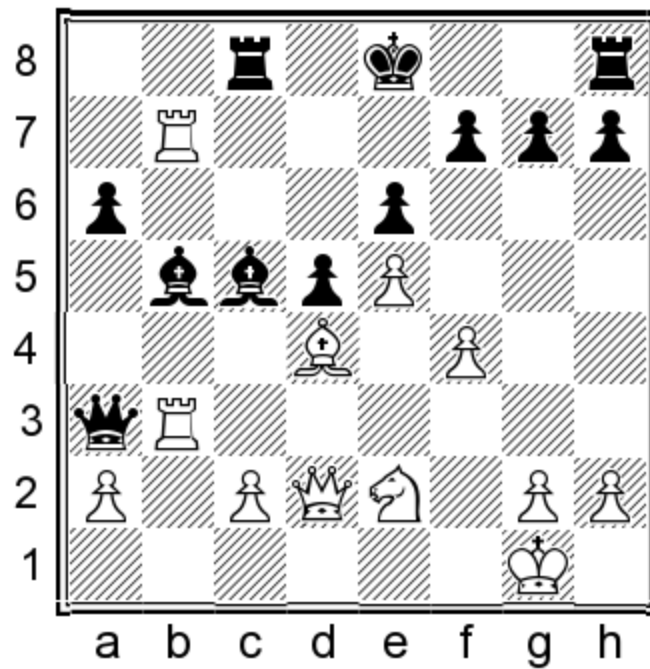
20...exf5 [20...Qc5 21.c3 exf5 22.e6 is a much better version for White since he can maneuver the queen closer with decisive effect. 22...fxe6 23.Qe3 Rxc3 24.Qe5+-]  
 21.e6 fxe6 22.Rb8+ Rc8 23.Rxc8+ Bxc8 24.Nxe6 Qd6  
 25.Nxg7+ Kf7 26.Nh5<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 26.Nh5<sup>2</sup>*

One could say that this enjoyed some popularity in correspondence games though there is little joy for Black from a practical point of view. Even for the modern correspondence players there ought to be little fun in defending such a broken position.

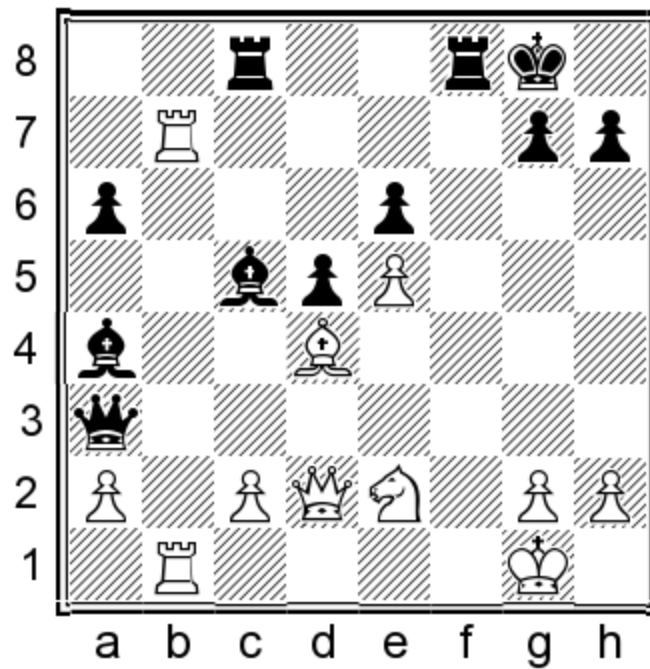
**C)** Bishop moves will mostly lead to a typical endgame:  
18...Bb5 19.Rb3



*Position after: 19.Rb3*

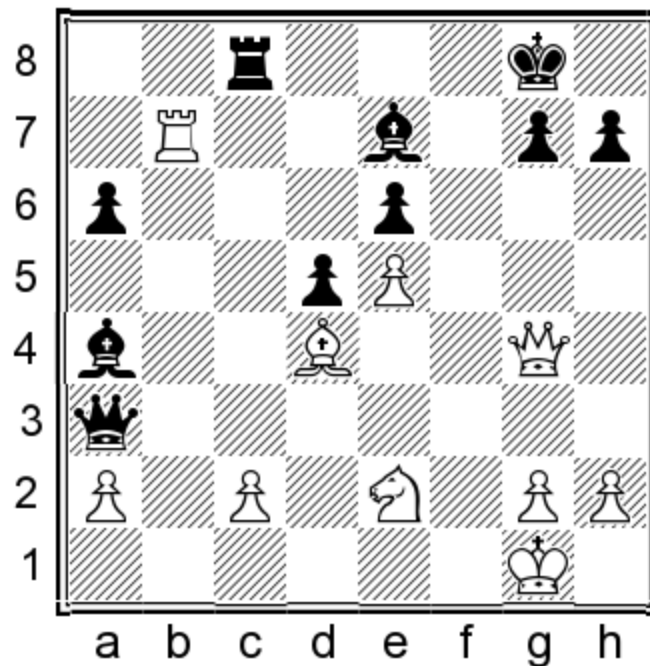
19...Bxd4+ [19...Qxa2? loses material to 20.Bxc5 Rxc5 21.Rb8++-] 20.Nxd4 Qc5 21.Qb4 0-0 22.a4 Be8 23.a5± Black's pieces are horribly stuck.

**D)** 18...Ba4, stopping Rb3 ideas, is quite testing, but if White knows the whole forcing sequence, it is also quite bad. 19.f5 0-0 20.fxe6 [20.f6? Bxc2! is the key trick Black is hiding up his sleeve.] 20...fxe6



*Position after: 20...fxe6*

It might seem as if Black has successfully stabilized their position, managing to both castle and stop f5-f6. However White's attack goes on. 21.Qg5 Rf7 22.Rxf7 Kxf7 23.Rb7+ Be7 24.Qh5+! A little triangulation. 24...Kg8 25.Qg4

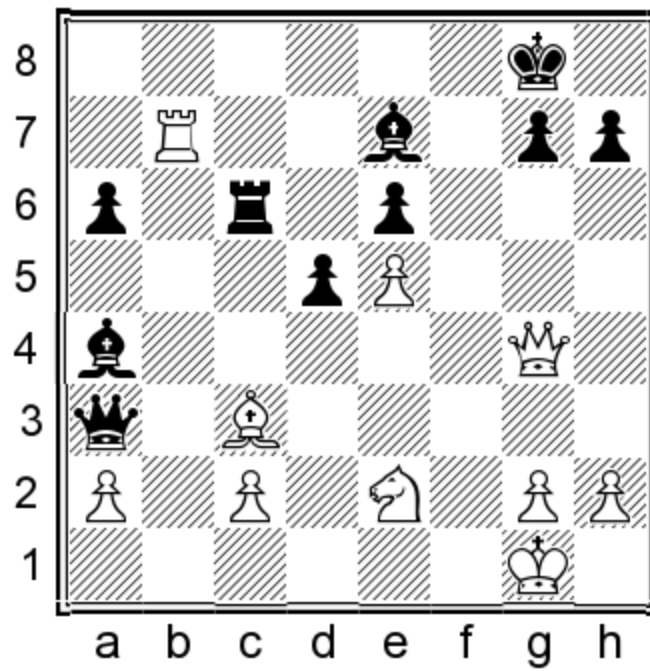


*Position after: 25.Qg4*

**D1)** 25...Kf7 26.c3! With Black's king exposed we can opt for slightly slower play. 26...Bc2 [26...Bd1? simply loses the e6-pawn due to 27.Rb6+-] 27.h4 Bf5 28.Qg3± and after Nf4-h5 Black's position will be on the verge of collapse.

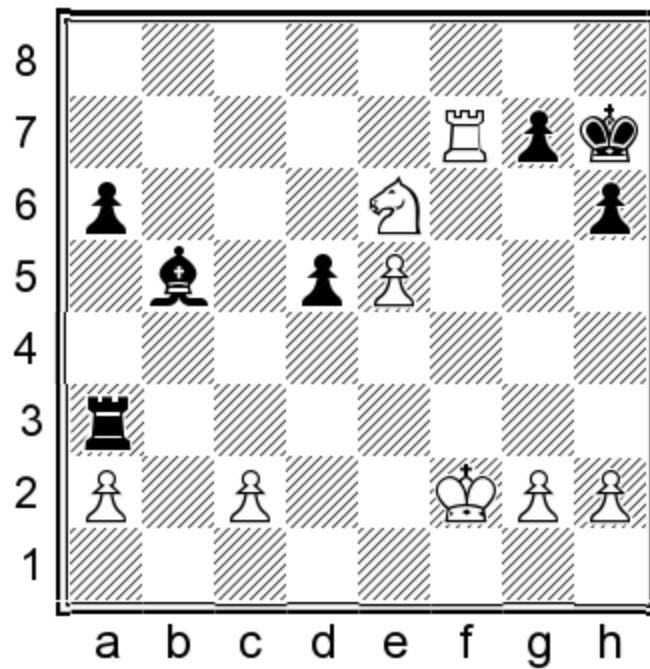
**D2)** 25...Rc6 26.Bc3!, threatening a backrank check and then swinging the bishop to b4, brings Black unsolvable problems, e.g. [the simple 26.c3 should be possible here as well, although it works better with the king already lured to f7 as 26...Bd1 is a little bit unpleasant for White.]





*Position after: 26.Bc3!*

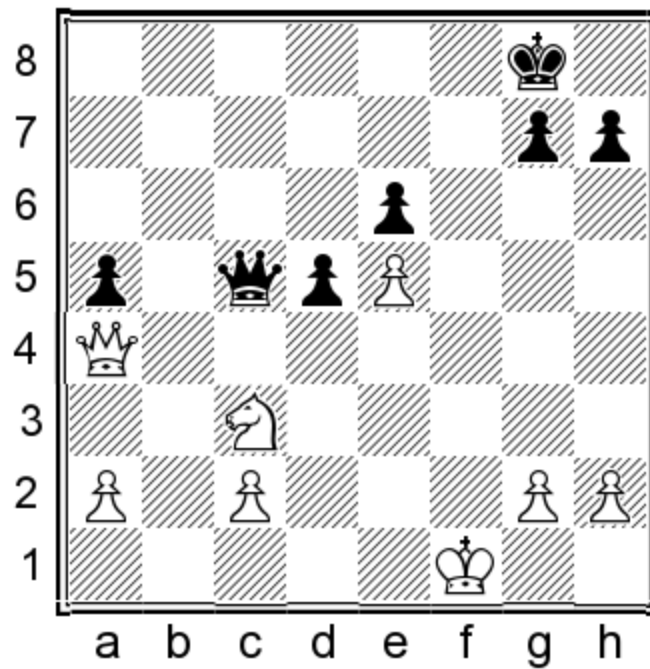
**D2.1)** 26...h6 27.Qg6! Bf8 28.Qf7+ Kh7 29.Rb8 Qe7  
 30.Rxf8 Qxf7 31.Rxf7 Bb5 32.Nd4 Rxc3 33.Kf2 Ra3  
 34.Nxe6±



*Position after: 34.Nxe6±*

is a horrible endgame on any scale.

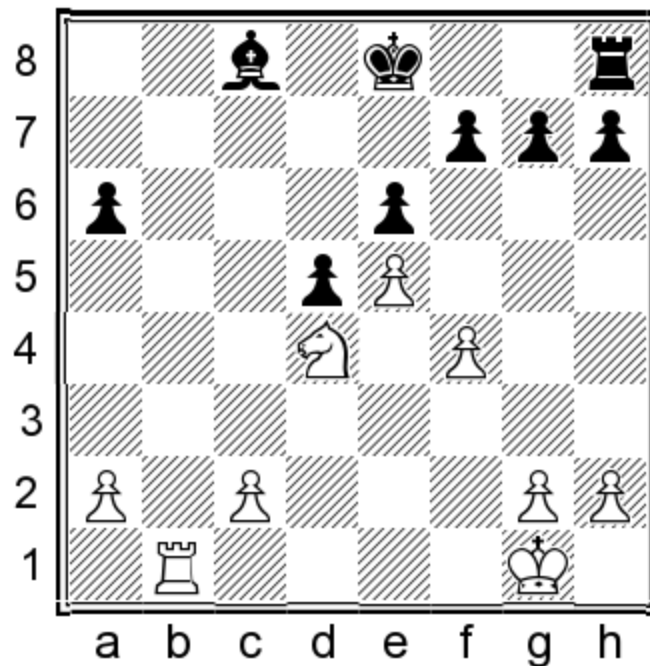
**D2.2)** Black also does not have time to properly cover the b4-square due to 26...a5 27.Rxe7! Qxe7 28.Qxa4 Rxc3 29.Nxc3 Qc5+ 30.Kf1



*Position after: 30.Kf1*

when it becomes clear that the sacrifice on e7 was already a threat on move 26, and so Black needs to make luft for their king.

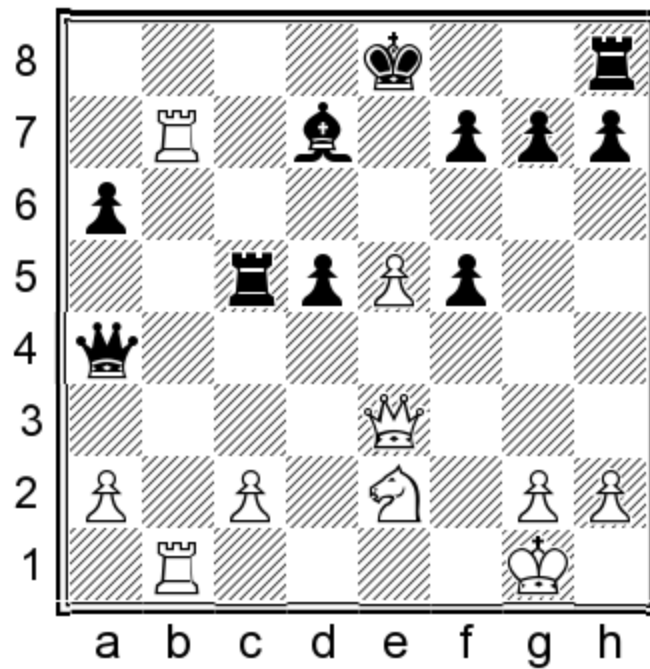
**D2.3)** 26...g6 27.Bb4!! Bxb4 28.Qh4!, exposing the weakness of Black's king. 28...h5 29.Qf6+- **E)** 18...Bc6 19.R7b3 forces favorable simplifications. 19...Bxd4+ 20.Nxd4 Qc5 21.Qc3 Qxc3 22.Rxc3 Bd7 23.Rxc8+ Bxc8



*Position after: 23...Bxc8*

Black will suffer not only due to their “bad” bishop – in fact, all of their pieces can be considered “bad” as they are much less active in comparison with White’s army.  
 24.Rb6 Kd7 25.a4 Kc7 26.a5+– White just brings their king to the center, collects the a6 pawn with something like c3, Nc2-b4 and there is not much Black can do.

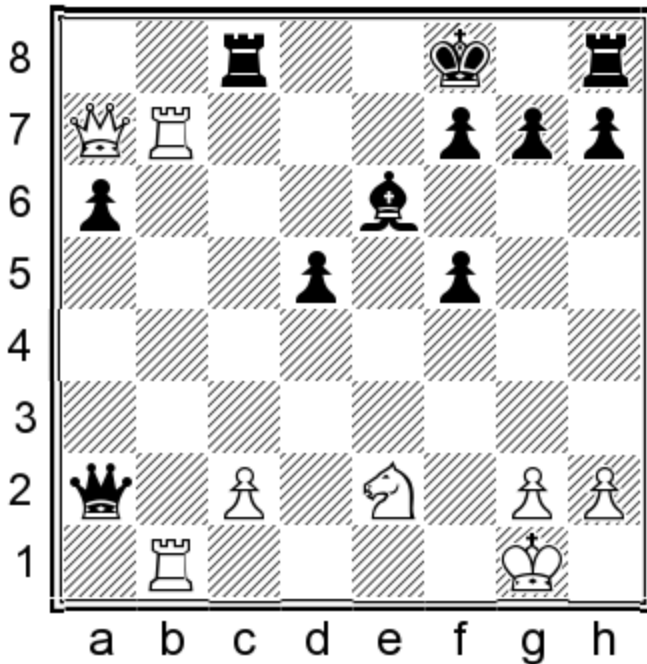
**F)** 18...Qa4 prepares castling but Black should never get enough time for that. 19.Bxc5 Rxc5 20.f5 exf5 21.Qe3!



*Position after: 21.Qe3!*

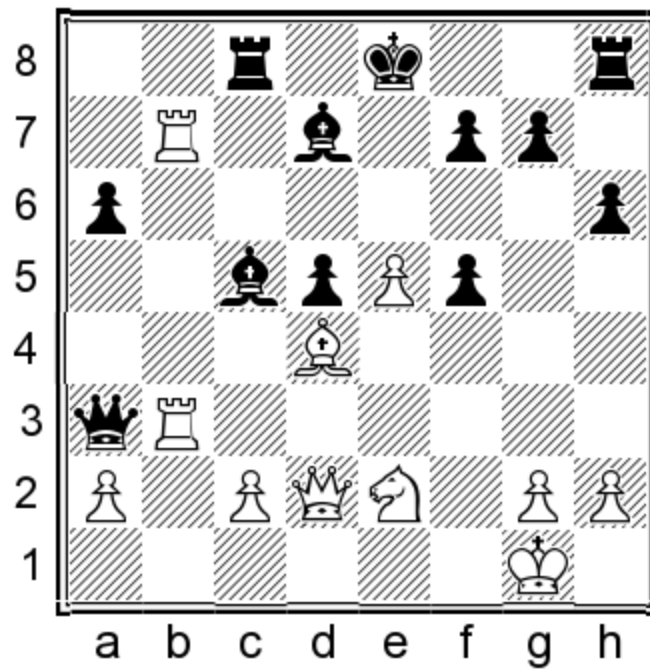
Since Black's queen is not protecting the c5-square anymore, White can use this to occupy the 7th rank. 21...Rc8 22.Qa7 Qxa2 23.e6! This should already come to you naturally – for White it is more of a liability than an asset to have such a pawn. 23...Bxe6 [23...fxe6 24.Re1!, intending Nd4 and opening up the e-file, is decisive as

well.] 24.Re7+ Kf8 25.Reb7+-



*Position after: 25.Reb7+- Now that Black's dreams of castling have evaporated, White has enough time to bring the knight into the attack via d4 and the black fortress should be collapsing very soon.*

**19.f5! exf5 20.R1b3**

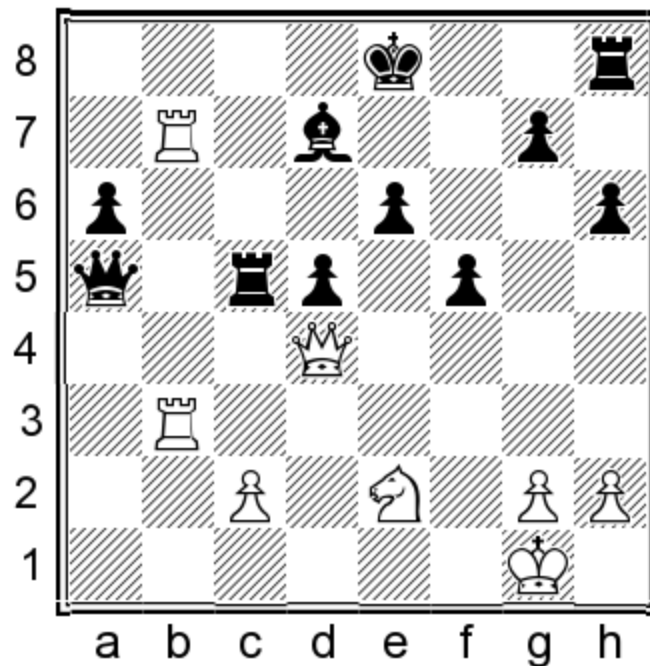


*Position after: 20.R1b3*

**20...Qxa2**

After 20...Qa4 21.Bxc5 Rxc5 22.Nd4 Black is still unable to hide their king due to 22...0-0? 23.R3b4+–, so they might as well try to take some extra material.

**21.e6! fxe6 22.Bxc5 Rxc5 23.Qd4 Qa5**



*Position after: 23...Qa5*

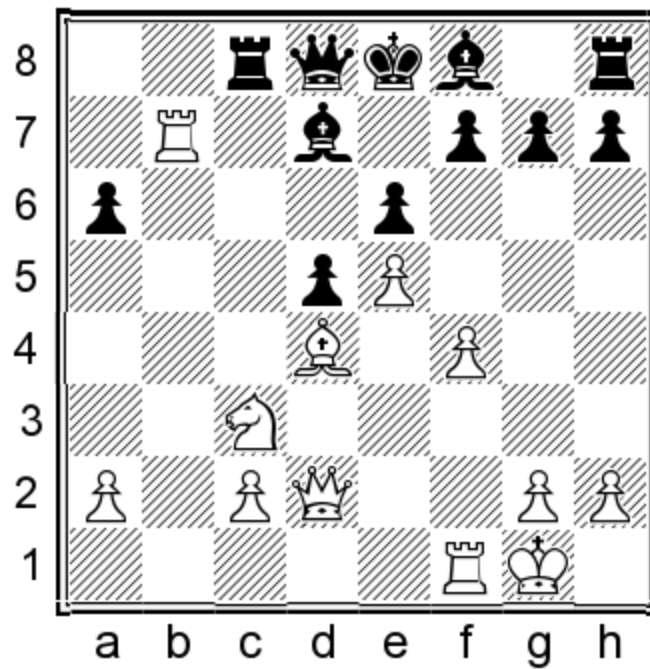
As Black has sneakily set up a threat of mate in one, several games continued 24.h3! Rg8 25.Qe5, with almost a 100% success rate.

It is a Herculean task to defend Black's exposed king against the coordinated effort of White's whole army.

**e) 12...a6 & 16...Qd8**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7  
15.Rxb7 Rc8 16.0-0 Qd8**



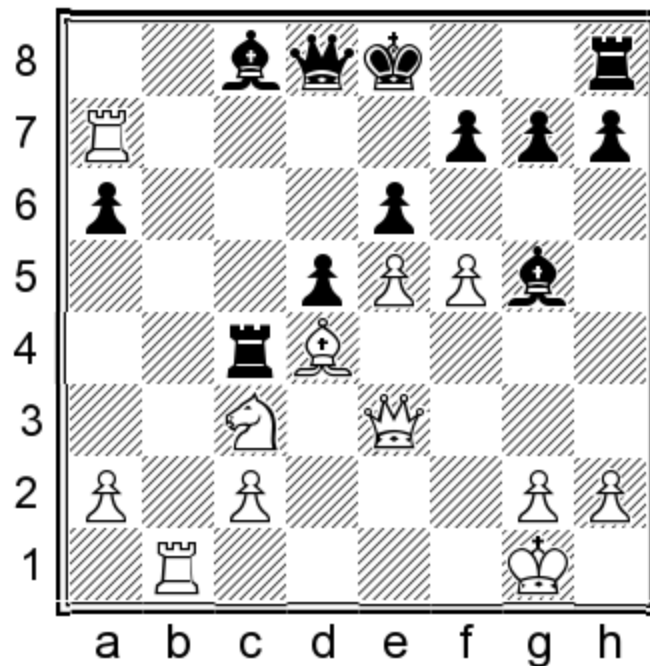


*Position after: 16...Qd8*

The quiet move.

## **17.Qf2**

The most popular move is 17.Qe3, the crucial difference being that 17...Rc4 18.Rfb1 Be7 19.f5 Bc8 20.Ra7 Bg5!



*Position after: 20...Bg5!*

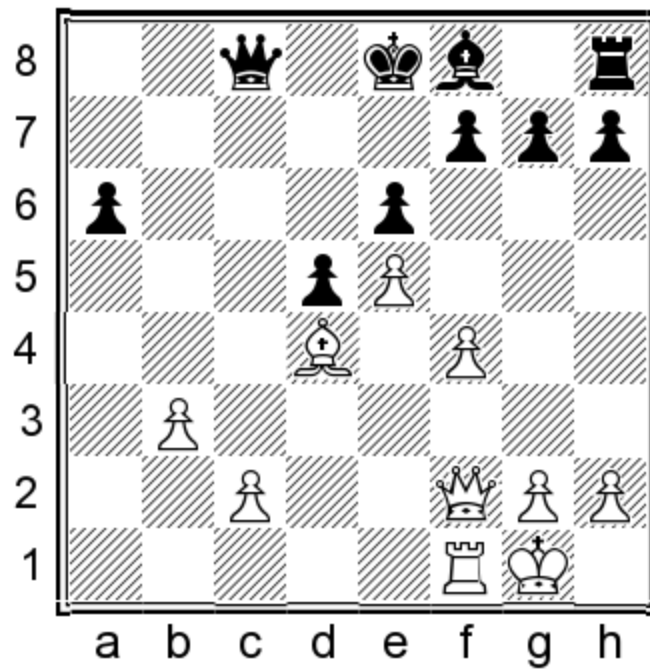
gives Black enough time to sort of finish development with 21.Qf2 0-0 22.f6 gxf6 23.exf6 Qd6. We could elaborate further but Black seems to be holding, albeit sometimes just by the skin of their teeth.

## **17...Rc4**

This seems to be the place where the theoretical discussion is heating up the most, though closer inspection suggests it is of little practical value.

17...Rxc3 could be the reason behind 17.Qf2 significantly lagging behind in popularity compared to 17.Qe3.

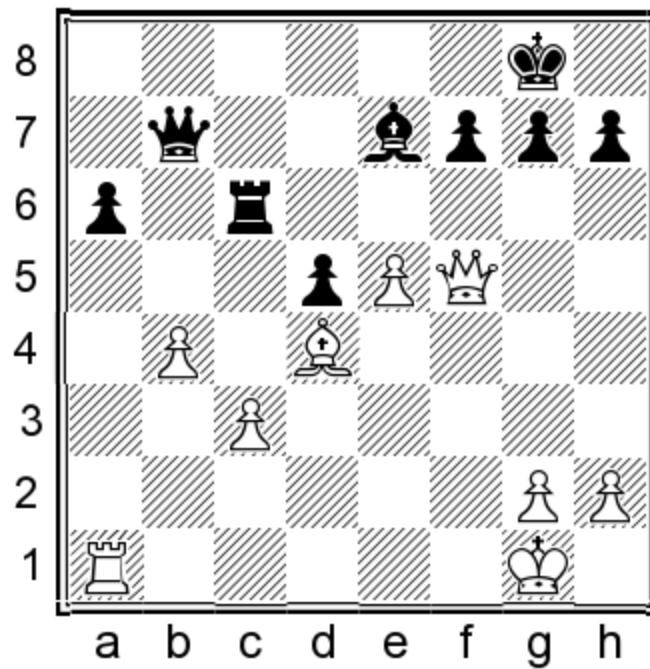
Surprisingly it is quite easy for White to claim a long-term advantage without too many lines to remember. One must only dig a little deeper past some simplifications. 18.Bxc3 Qc8 19.Rb3 Ba4 20.Bd4 Bxb3 21.axb3



*Position after: 21.axb3*

This was basically forced and the following moves are quite logical too. Black finishes their development while White strengthens the grip on the dark squares. 21...Be7 22.c3 0-0 23.Ra1

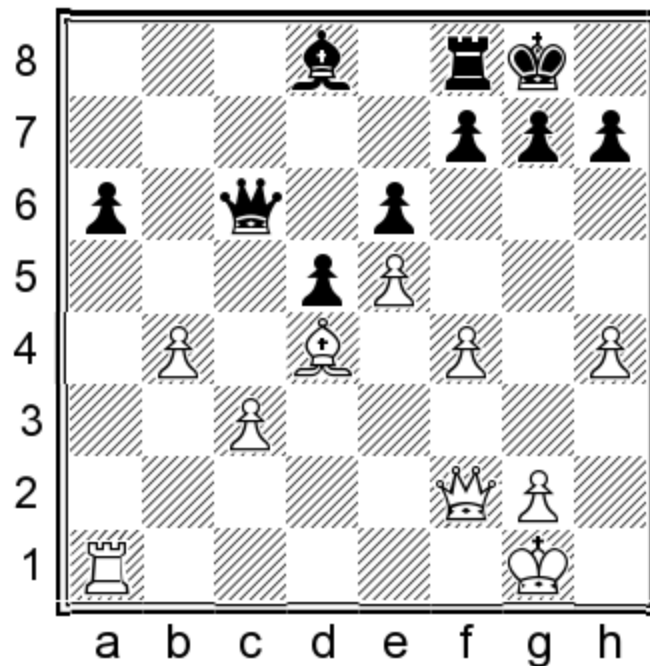
**A)** 23...Qb7 24.b4 In general it is advisable to keep the rook on f8 as White can decide to open the f-file at any time, for example 24...Rc8 25.f5! exf5 26.Qxf5 Rc6



*Position after: 26...Rc6*

and now 27.Qf3! Rc8 28.e6! with the idea of 28...fxe6 29.Qg4+- . This was missed in one of the rare practical games played in this line.

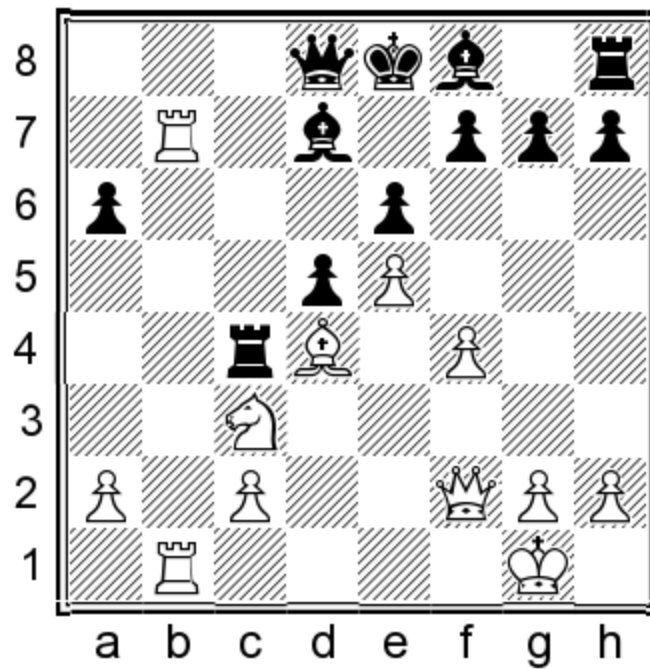
**B)** 23...Qc6 24.b4 Bd8 25.h4<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 25.h4<sup>2</sup>*

White keeps nasty pressure here. They can decide to further strengthen their position by moving their king away from the a7-g1 diagonal, and then either play the space-gaining h4-h5, go for the a6-pawn, or even launch a kingside storm with g4. At the same time Black has to constantly worry about their a6 weakness and suffers from a significant lack of space [note that it would be too soon for 25.Qe2? as 25...Bb6! would exchange the passive d8-bishop.].

**18.Rfb1**



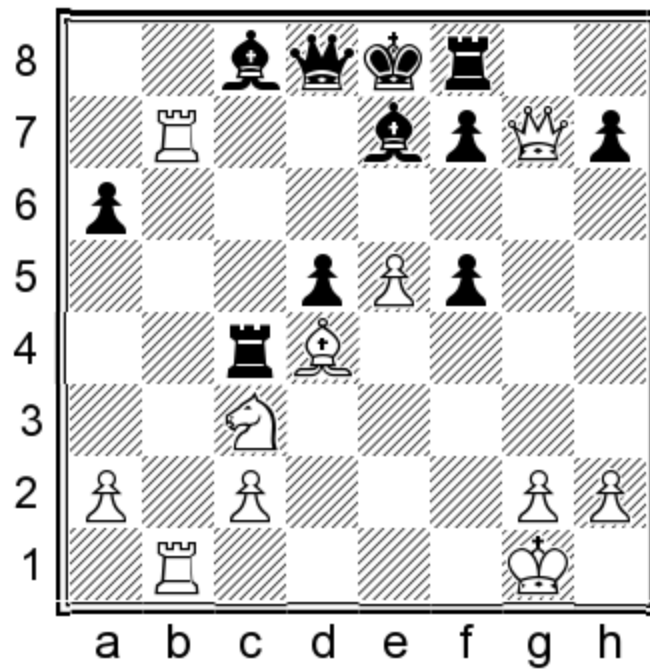
*Position after: 18.Rfb1*

### **18...Ba3**

The only way to shake things up a little is this bishop dance.

**A)** 18...Be7 19.f5 would be appalling now since there is no tempo gain with ...Bg5.

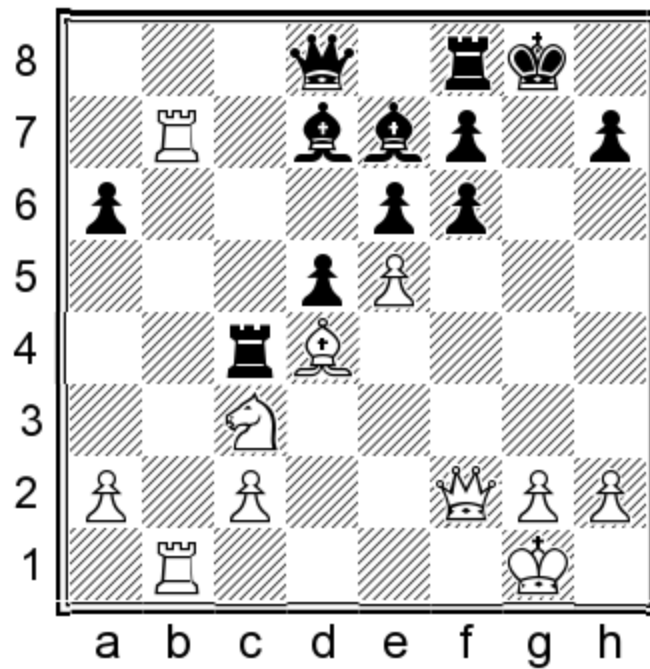
**A1)** 19...exf5 can be compared with the text. White can simply capture the d5-pawn and enjoy a slightly improved version of our mainline, since the rook is better placed on b1, or finish Black off immediately with 20.Qg3! Bc8 21.Qxg7 Rf8



*Position after: 21...Rf8*

22.Rxe7+! Qxe7 [22...Kxe7 23.Be3!+-, with Bg5 or Bh6 coming next, is brutal.] 23.Nxd5 Qd8 24.Nf6+ Ke7 25.Bb6! (this is the difference - the white rook is protecting the first rank in comparison with the 18...Ba3 line) 25...Qd2 26.Nxh7+-.

**A2)** 19...0-0 20.f6 gxf6

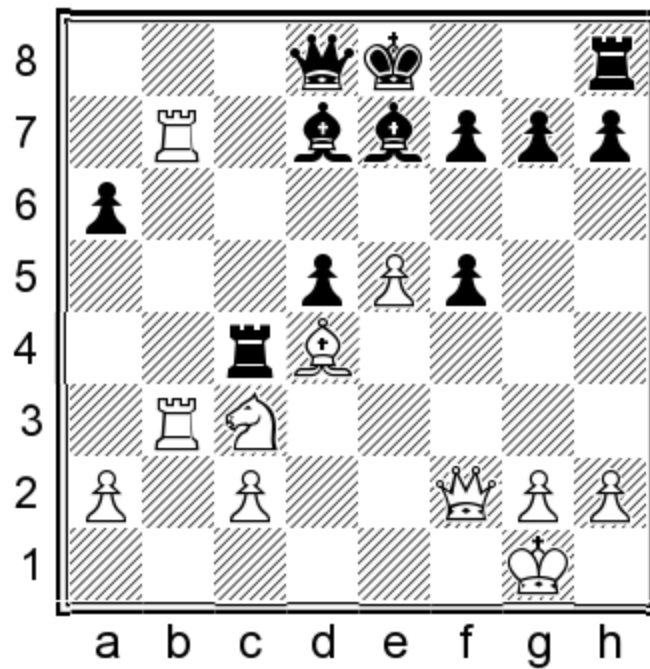


*Position after: 20...gxf6*

21.Rxd7! smells like checkmate. 21...Qxd7 22.Qg3+ Kh8  
 23.exf6 Rg8 24.fxe7+- **B)** 18...Bc8 19.Ra7 only makes  
 matters worse, giving White's rook more scope on the 7th  
 rank.

**19.R1b3 Be7 20.f5 exf5**





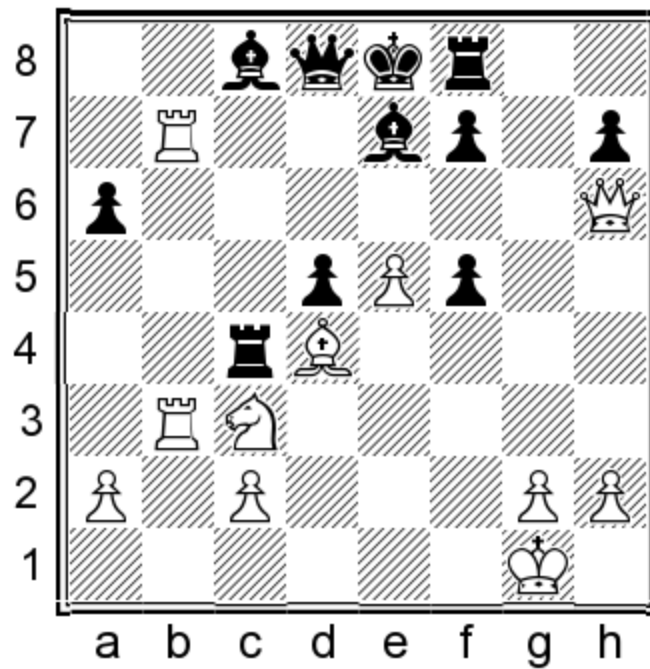
*Position after: 20...exf5*

## **21.Nxd5!**

White initiates a forced sequence and objectively Black's best defense might just be to give up their queen and hope for the best in a clearly one-sided endgame.

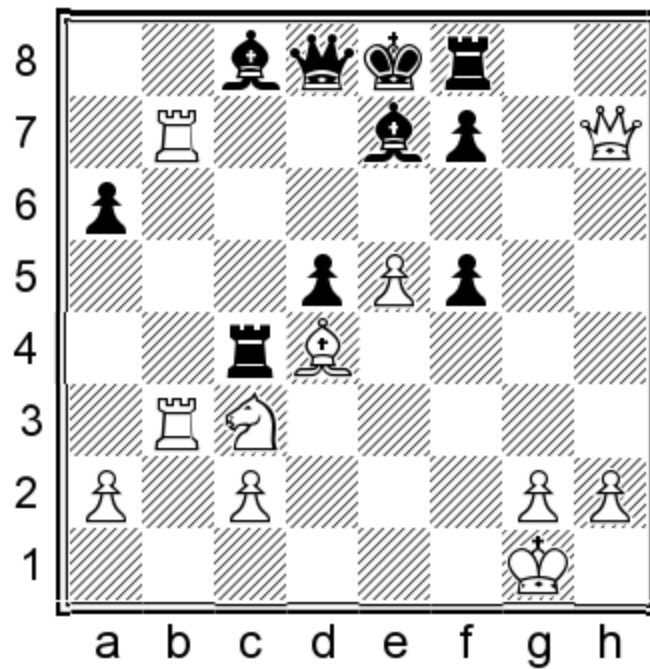
21.Qg3!? does not work so well here. Some ground has already been covered here in correspondence games, and if any conclusion can be drawn from the (drawn) games played, it is that the position tends to be incredibly messy.

21...Bc8 22.Qxg7 Rf8 23.Qh6



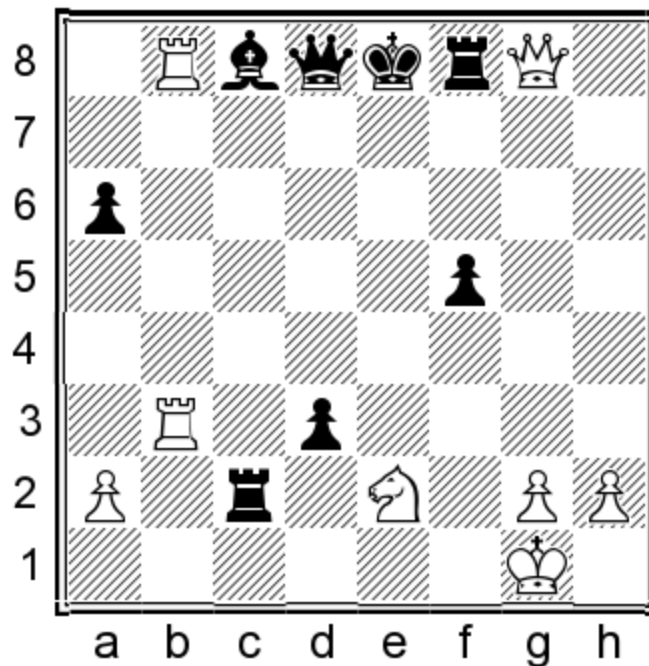
*Position after: 23.Qh6*

23...Rg8 [23...Rxd4?! would be a mistake – 24.Qc6+ Bd7  
 25.Qxa6 Rc4 26.Nxd5 Rc6 27.Qe2 Rg8 28.Rd3 Qc8 29.Nxe7  
 Kxe7 30.Rbxd7+ Qxd7 31.Rxd7+ Kxd7 32.Qb5±.] 24.Qxh7  
 [24.Rb8 also leads nowhere after 24...Rg6 25.Qd2 f4∞.]  
 24...Rf8



*Position after: 24...Rf8*

25.Bb6 [25.Qh6 Rxd4 26.Qc6+ Bd7 27.Qxa6 Bc5 28.Kh1 Qh4,,] 25...Bc5+ 26.Bxc5 Rxc5 27.Rb8 d4 28.Ne2 Rxc2 29.e6 d3 30.exf7+ Rxf7 31.Qg8+ Rf8∞



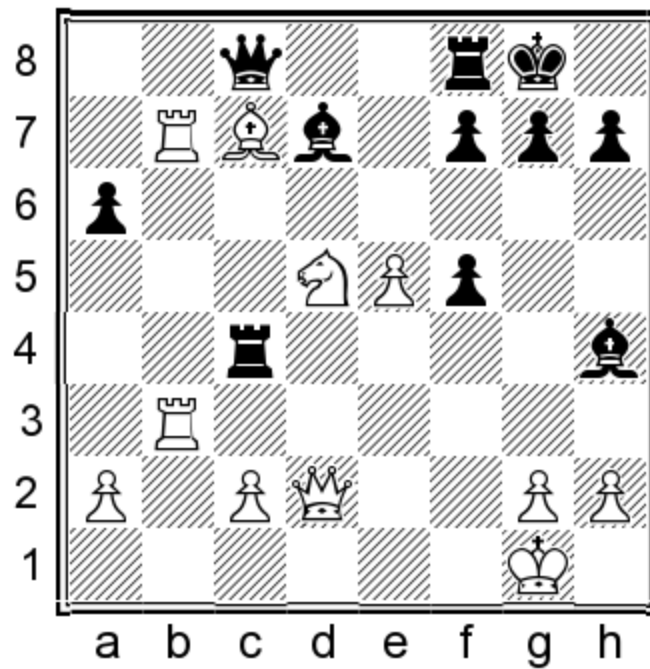
*Position after: 31...Rf8 $\infty$*

If you decide to explore these complex lines yourself, do bear in mind that the computers tend to overestimate White's chances quite a lot, especially at a lower depth. The further one digs, the more things tend to become unclear double-edged positions or perpetual checks.

**21...Bh4<sup>TM</sup>**

Other moves are losing straight away, e.g. 21...0-0? 22.Bb6 Qe8 23.Nxe7+ Qxe7 24.Rd3+-, winning the unfortunate bishop.

**22.Qd2 0-0<sup>TM</sup> 23.Bb6 Qc8<sup>TM</sup> 24.Bc7!**

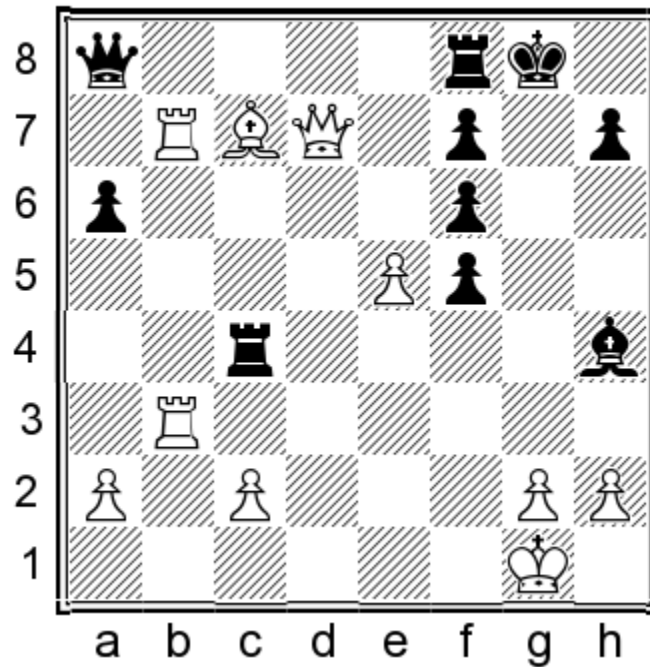


*Position after: 24.Bc7!*

This is a crucial move to remember. White is threatening Rb8 and all possible defenses have serious drawbacks.

### **24...Be6**

**A)** 24...Qa8 is probably the most obvious move, trying to escape Rb8 with a check on a7. However, 25.Nf6+! gxf6 26.Qxd7

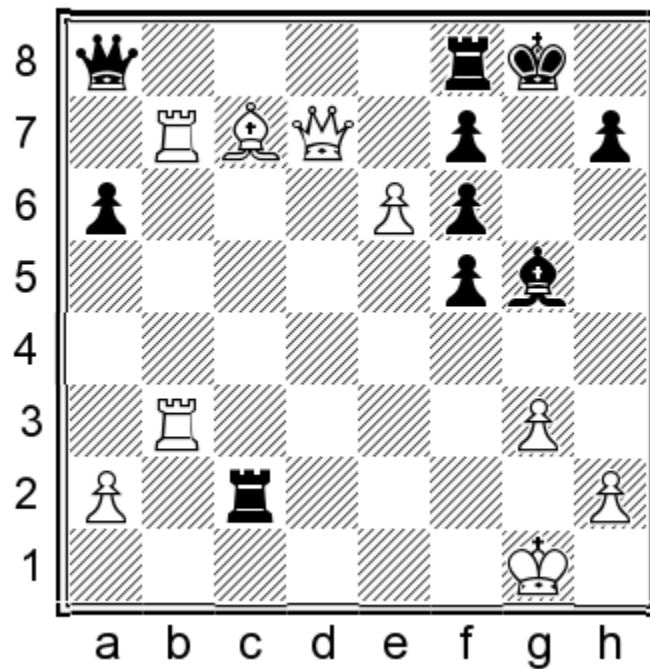


*Position after: 26.Qxd7*

leads to a very difficult situation for the defender.

**A1)** 26...Qe8 27.Bd6! Qxd7 28.Rxd7 Re8 29.Rbb7 fxe5 30.Rxf7 Rg4 31.Rxf5± simplifies to a clearly advantageous endgame for White, and being a pawn down is actually the least of Black's problems.

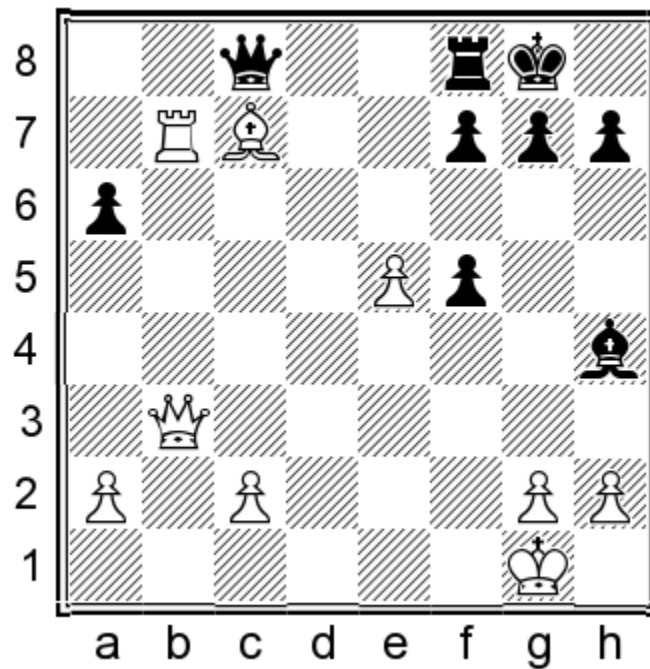
**A2)** 26...Qc8 27.e6! nicely takes away the e6-square from the black queen and after 27...fxe6 28.Qd6!, Rb8 will be crushing. 28...Rxc2 29.g3! (please mind the little mating trap of ...Rc1) 29...Bg5 30.Rb8+- **A3)** 26...Rxc2 27.g3! Bg5 [27...Qc8 28.e6! fxe6 29.Qd6 transposes] 28.e6!



*Position after: 28.e6!*

The last two pawn pushes should already come naturally to you, and this time Black will suffer the other drawback of capturing on e6 which is being checkmated after 28...fxe6 29.Bf4+-.

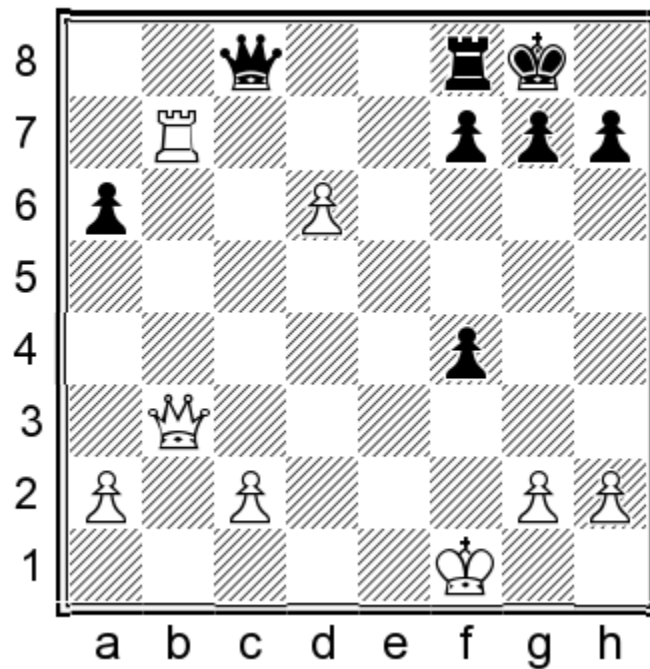
**B)** 24...Rc5 25.Qd4 Rxd5 26.Qxd5 Be6 27.Qf3 Bxb3 28.Qxb3



*Position after: 28.Qxb3*

Admittedly this might not look so clear at first sight, but a closer look reveals that Black is tangled up and will eventually have to give up some material. 28...Be7 29.Kf1! White needs to get Bd6 in (which is why Black played ...Be7), and therefore it is necessary to move the king away from possible checks on c5. At the same time the king will feel quite comfortable closer to the center where there will be no possibilities of backrank mate. 29...f4 Threatening to activate Black's queen, but we are in time. 30.Bd6 Bxd6 31.exd6

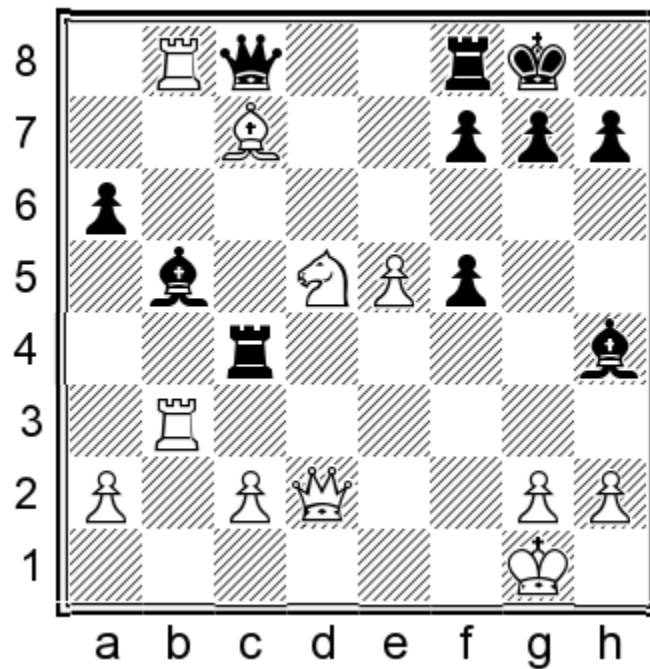




*Position after: 31.exd6*

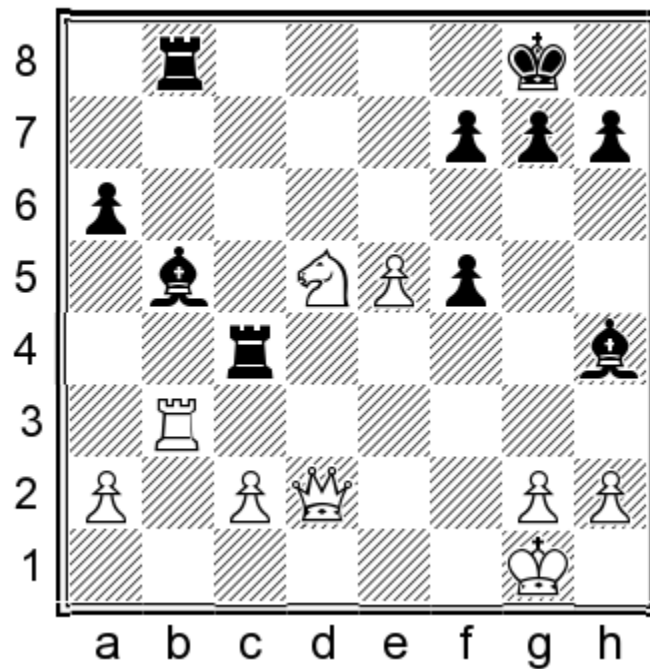
31...Qc5 [31...Qc6 32.Rb6 Qc5 33.Rxa6± simply drops another pawn.] 32.Qd3± Material is balanced but White's d-pawn is very strong. They can even consider reinforcing it with Rb7-b1-d1 if needed, safeguarding their king at the same time. Black's position looks incredibly tough.

**C)** 24...Bb5 25.Rb8



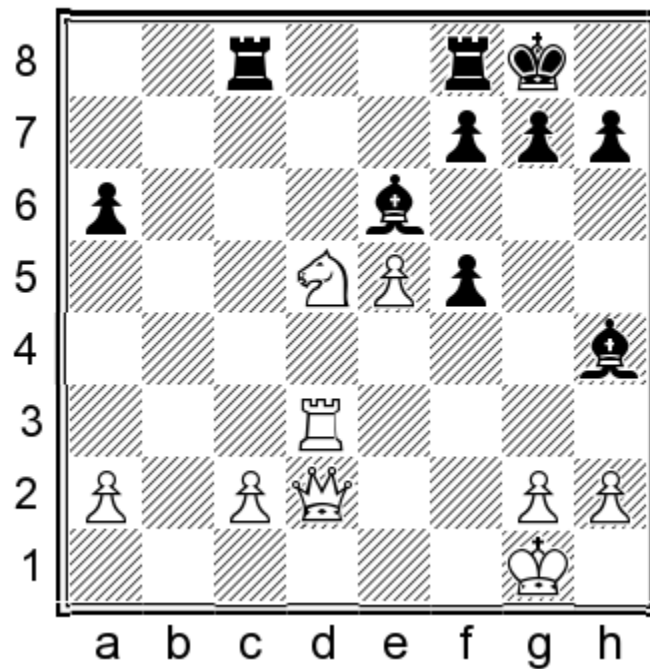
*Position after: 25.Rb8*

25...Qxb8 [25...Qd7? is not the best square for the queen.  
 26.R3xb5! axb5 27.Nf6++-; 25...Qe6 26.Rxf8+ Kxf8 27.g3  
 Rxc7 28.Nxc7 Qb6+ 29.Kh1 Qxc7 30.gxh4 Qxe5 31.Re3  
 Qb8 32.Qd5] 26.Bxb8 Rxb8



*Position after: 26...Rxb8*

In this version of Black's queen "sacrifice" (I prefer the term "loss") Black happens to be losing by force. 27.g3 – besides this forced sequence White is winning with 27.Rb4 as well, although the maneuvering required is a bit complicated for my taste. From a human perspective it should be easier to finish the opponent off with a couple of logical tactical blows – 27...Bd8 28.e6! fxe6 29.Qe3 Re4 [The key is to remember we were pushing the bishop back to d8 so that 29...exd5 30.Rxb5! works – the threat of checkmate on e8 is decisive.] 30.Qa7 Rc8 31.Rxb5! And the rook strikes again. 31...axb5 [31...Rxc2 32.Rb1 exd5 33.Qa8 Re8 34.Qxd5+ Kh8 35.Qf7 Rce2 36.Rb8+- will lead to further material gains very soon.] 32.Qd7+- 25.Rb8 Rxc7 26.Rxc8 Rxc8 27.Rd3<sup>2</sup>



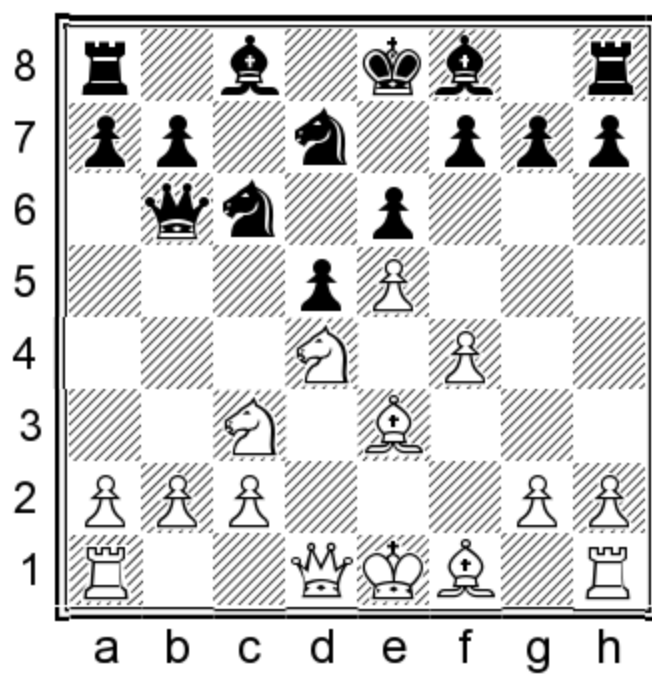
*Position after: 27.Rd3<sup>2</sup>*

I suspect this is what correspondence players have in mind when they are trying to defend this position. However, as the saying goes, “Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi” – “What is permissible for Jupiter is not permissible for a bull”. I can hardly see any human player going for this without computer assistance and it should be extremely difficult to defend this position in practical play.

# Chapter 17

## ...cxd4 & ...Qb6 - Main Tabiya

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 17 - ...cxd4 & ...Qb6 (Main Tabiya)

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3 11.Bb5  
Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7 15.Rxb7

a) 15...Qh4+ 16.Qf2!

b) 15...Qd8 16.0-0!?

c) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qh4+?

d) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! --

e) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! Ba3! & 20...--

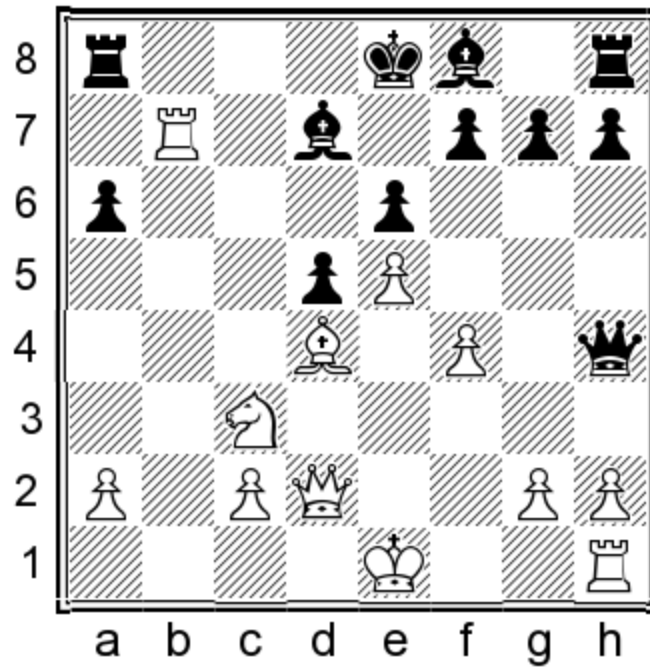
f) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! Ba3! &  
20...Rc8

**a) 15...Qh4+ 16.Qf2!**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7  
15.Rxb7**

Before delving into the most principled variations of the ...Qh4+ / ...Qd8 system, let us examine some alternative set-ups you can utilize. Were it not for the line played in the game Alekseenko – Christiansen, Khanty-Mansiysk 2019, I would be more than happy to recommend the first half of this chapter even as the main weapon. Nevertheless, it can never hurt to have some extra surprise cards hidden up your sleeve.

**15...Qh4+**

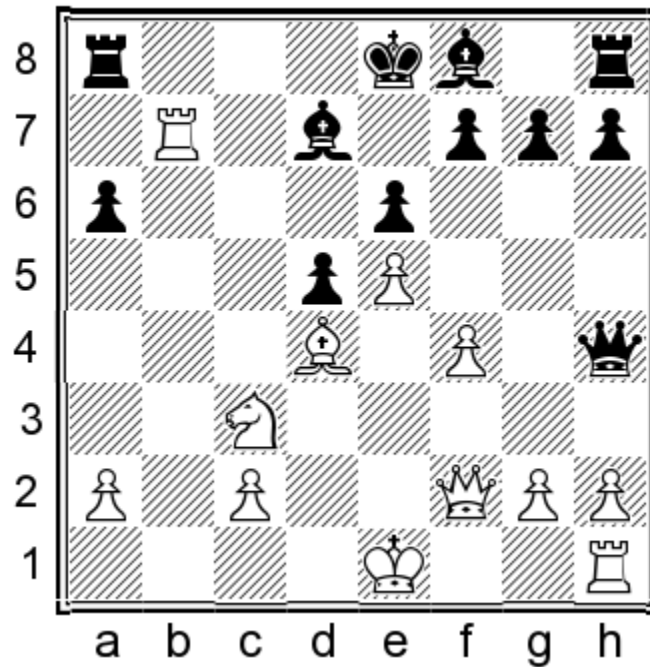


*Position after: 15...Qh4+*

gives White a host of extra options. The minimum you should learn from studying this line is that there is a very simple way of punishing Black for giving the patzer check with 16.Qf2!

**A)** 16.Bf2 would be my second choice as it transposes to our main weapon, which we will investigate further after 16...Qd8 17.Bb6.

**B)** Nevertheless, there is even a third option should you decide to perform your own research. 16.g3 leads to a very sharp fight where White is scoring well above average.



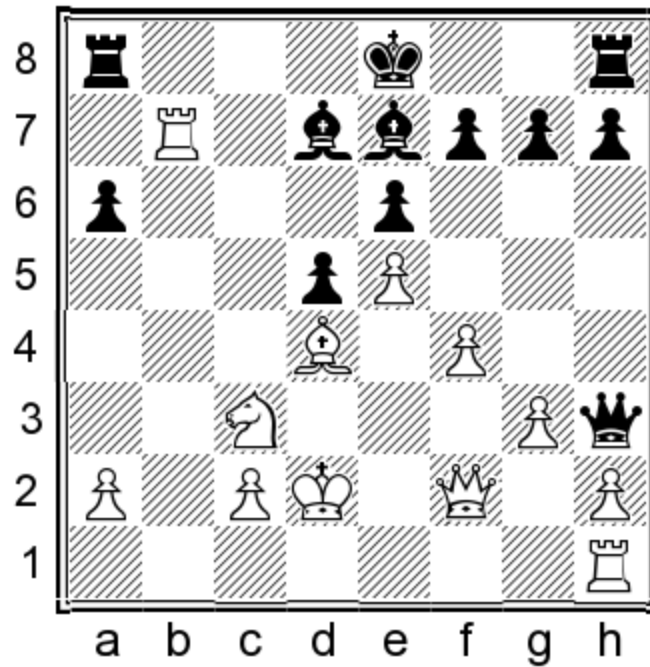
*Position after: 16.Qf2!*

### **16...Qxf2+**

The ensuing endgame promises a small yet stable edge for White. Black will most likely be able to simplify into an opposite-colored bishop endgame but White's tremendous activity should still secure them an advantage.

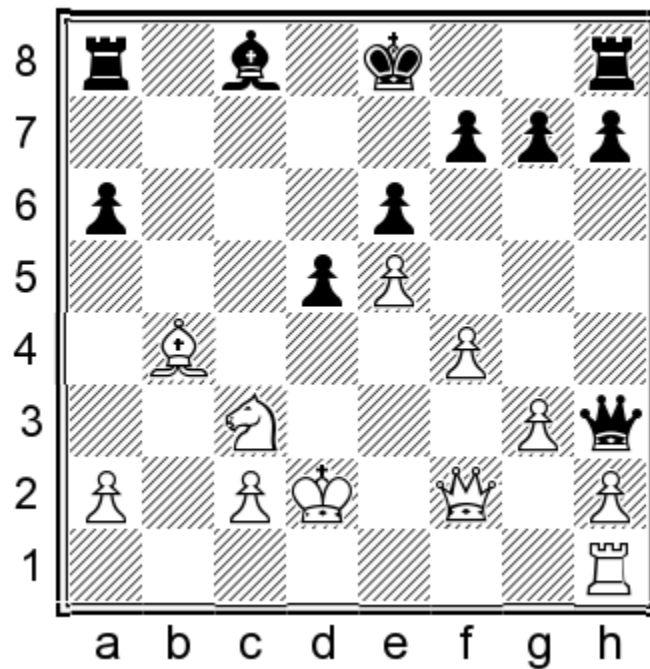
16...Be7 is a highly unsuitable move for the 16.g3 variation, therefore we go for 17.g3 Qh3 18.Kd2. While Black has lost a precious tempo (their bishop is not doing much) which could have been used for the ...h5-h4 counterattack, White's rook is ready to enter the battle.





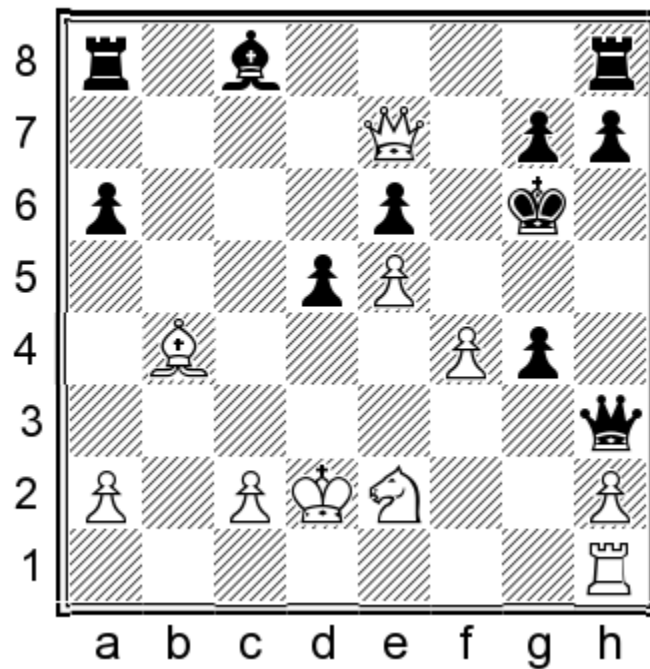
*Position after: 18.Kd2*

**A)** 18...Bc8 19.Rxe7+! is, besides being a brilliant sacrifice, a necessity as well, otherwise the black king would run away to the kingside! 19...Kxe7 20.Bc5+ Ke8 21.Bb4



*Position after: 21.Bb4*

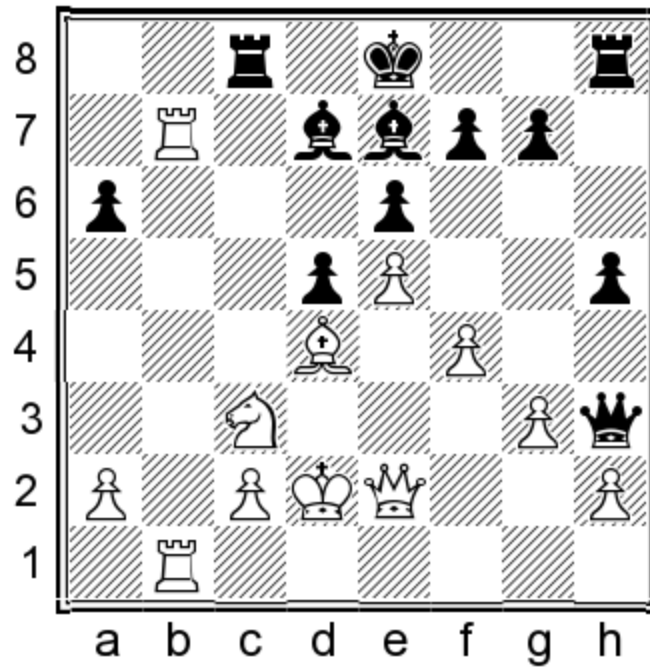
Now Black can try pushing the f-pawn as much as they like, but their king will not get too far away in any case. 21...f5 [21...a5 22.Nb5! axb4 23.Nc7+ Kf8 24.Nxa8± looks pretty grim too.; 21...f6 22.Qc5 Kf7 23.Qe7+ Kg6 24.exf6 gxf6 25.Ne2!, threatening both to bring the bishop into the attack via c3, and to push g3-g4, is unsurvivable.] 22.Qc5 There is no need to bother with taking on f6 since Black might not recapture and try to run away with the king instead. White has more than enough attacking potential even when there is a black pawn on f5. 22...Kf7 23.Qe7+ Kg6 24.g4! fxg4 Capturing with the queen would be even worse as the g-file would be open for White's rook. 25.Ne2!



*Position after: 25.Ne2!*

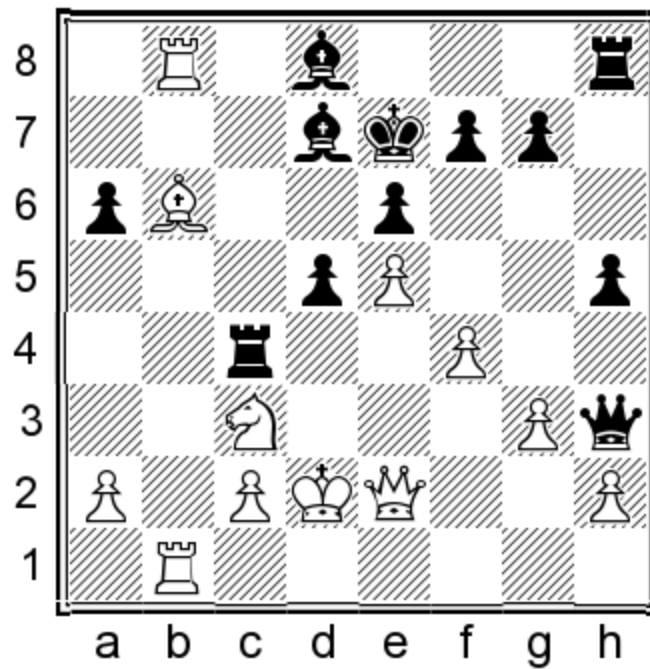
The only sensible defense against f4-f5+ is 25...Qf3 but then 26.Qg5+ Kf7 27.Qh5+ g6 28.Qh4 just becomes a pure exhibition of White's attacking skills. E.g. 28...Bd7 29.Qe7+ Kg8 30.Qxd7 Qxh1 31.Be7! (the most direct) 31...Qxh2 32.Bf6 Qh6 33.Qxe6++- and Black will soon lose both of their unfortunate rooks.

**B)** 18...h5 19.Rhb1 Rc8 (stopping Rb8+) 20.Qe2



*Position after: 20.Qe2*

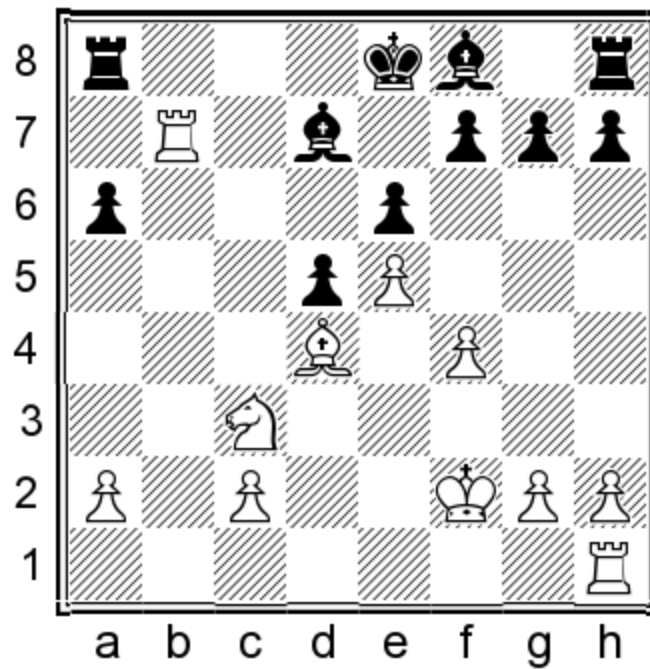
20...Rc4 [It has become apparent that Black is not in time to start sufficient counterplay with 20...h4 due to 21.Rxd7! Kxd7 22.Qxa6 Qxh2+ 23.Ne2+- and once again Black's lonely king is doomed.] 21.Rb8+ Bd8 [21...Bc8 22.Qxc4! dxc4 23.Rxc8+ Bd8 24.Rxd8+ Kxd8 25.Rb8+ Ke7 26.Rxh8 Qxh2+ 27.Ne2+- is no good either as White's pieces are clearly superior to the queen.] 22.Bb6 Ke7



*Position after: 22...Ke7*

It looks as if Black has managed to stop White's attack and will finally get started on their own play on the kingside, but a little prophylactic move 23.Rb3! puts an end to such speculations. If Black does not commit to ...h4 White will improve with Nd1-e3 and 23...h4 fails to 24.g4 Bxb6 25.R8xb6 (no need to rush to capture the h3-queen just yet) 25...Rxf4 26.Nxd5++-.

**17.Kxf2**

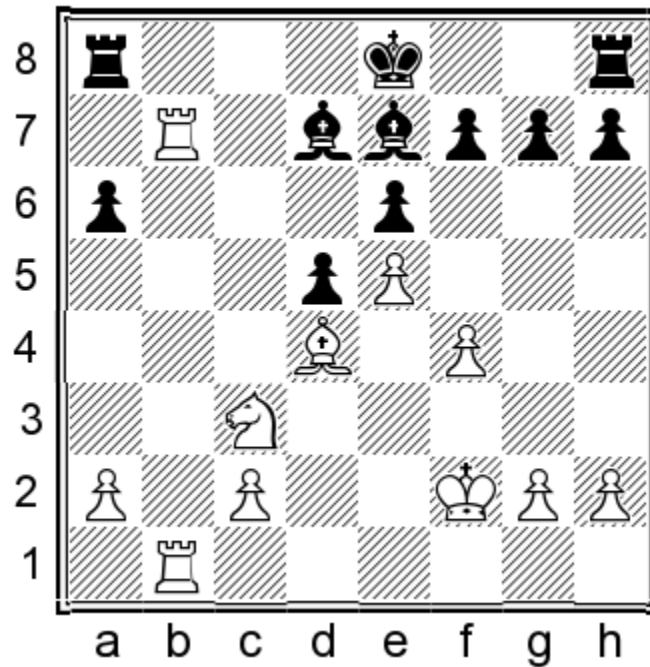


*Position after: 17.Kxf2*

### **17...Be7**

17...Rc8, kind of threatening ...Bc5, trying to exploit White's unstable pieces on the c-file, is a bit short-sighted. After 18.Ke3 Bc5 19.Bxc5 Rxc5 20.Kd3± the only thing Black managed to do is to simplify into a typical "bad French bishop" endgame.

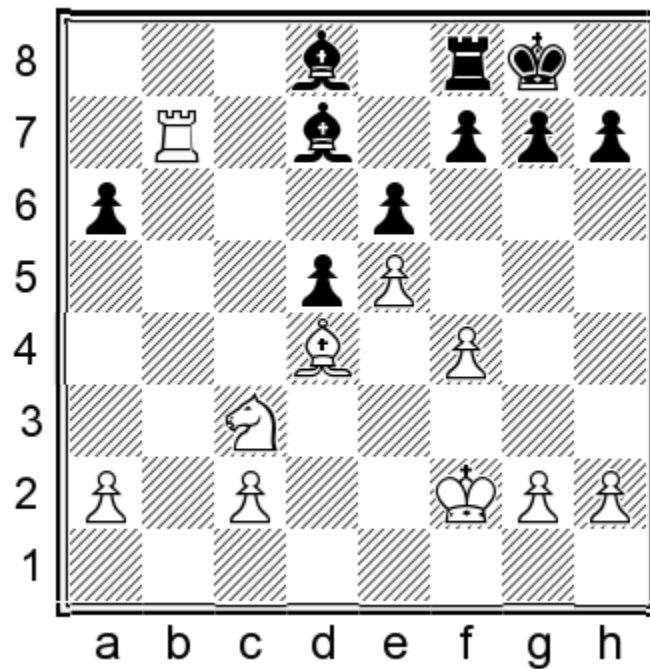
### **18.Rhb1**



*Position after: 18.Rhb1*

### **18...Bc8**

18...Bd8 is getting ready to kick the rook away with ...Bc6 and so immediate action is called for. 19.Rb8 Rxb8 20.Rxb8 0-0 [20...Bc6 21.Bb6 Kd7 22.Bxd8 Rxd8 23.Rxd8+ Kxd8 24.Ke3 is a pitiful sight. The game could continue 24...Kc7 25.Kd4 Kb6 26.f5 Bb5 27.f6±. White's knight is simply much better than the light-squared bishop in such positions.] 21.Rb7!

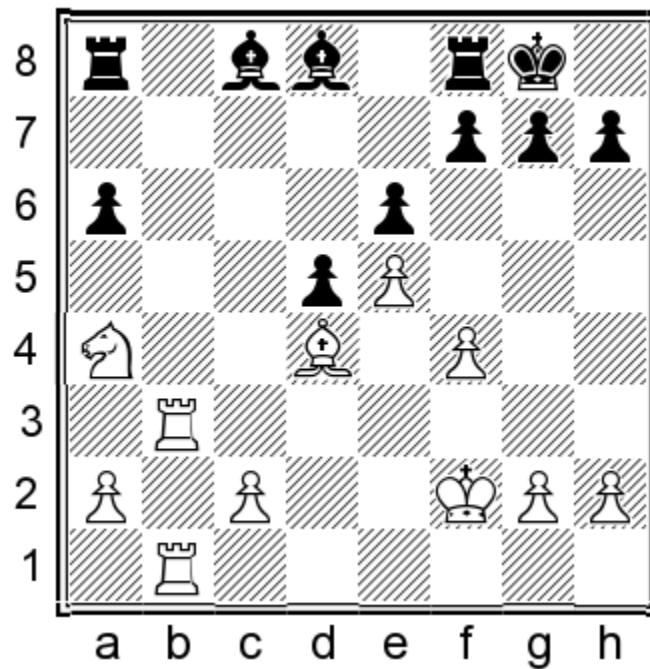


*Position after: 21.Rb7!*

White will convert their activity into an extra pawn and although Black retains some drawing chances, it becomes a one-sided battle once again. 21...Bc6 22.Ra7 Ba5 23.Rxa6 Bxc3 24.Bxc3 Rc8 25.Ke3 Bb7 [25...Bb5 26.Ra5!<sup>2</sup>, with the idea of 26...Rxc3+? 27.Kd2+–, is quite a sweet tactic.] 26.Ra3<sup>2</sup> It still remains to be seen whether White will be able to convert the extra pawn but there is little doubt Black is fighting for their life here.

**19.R7b3 0-0 20.Na4 Bd8**

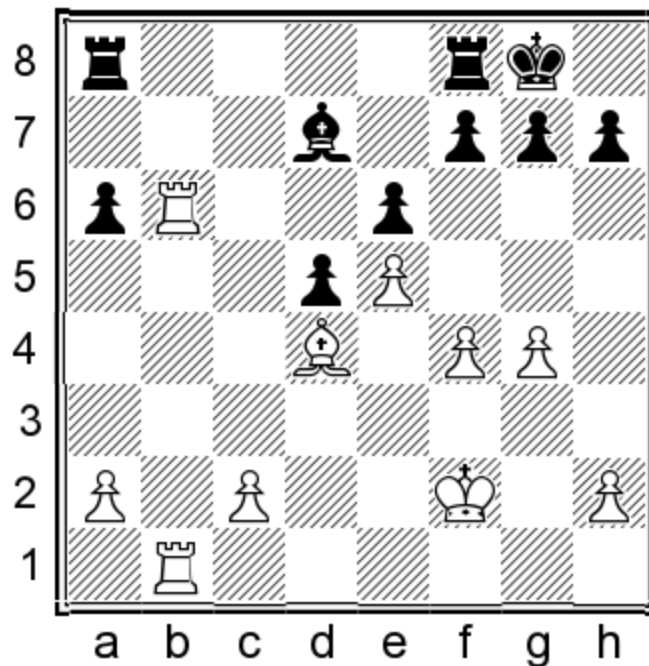




*Position after: 20...Bd8*

Another approach is to hold on to the material and defend like a dog. Fair enough, but White can head for the opposite-colored bishop endgame even with material equality.

**21.Nb6! Bxb6 22.Rxb6 Bd7 23.g4<sup>2</sup>**

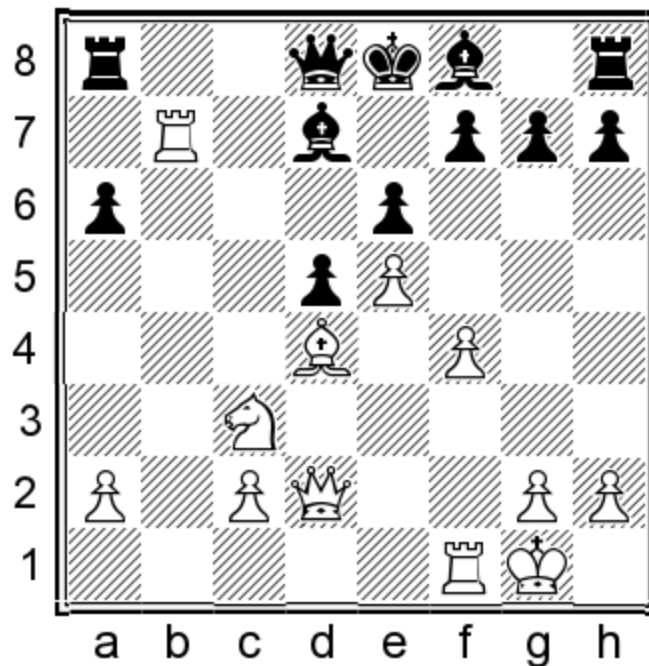


*Position after: 23.g4<sup>2</sup>*

White has a clear-cut plan of pushing the kingside pawns while any active black move could significantly weaken their already inferior position. The defensive line might be solid but with enough patience White's spatial advantage and activity should tell in the long run.

**b) 15...Qd8 16.0-0!?**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7  
15.Rxb7 Qd8 16.0-0!?**



*Position after: 16.0-0!?*

White is threatening to blast through on the f-file utilizing the f4-f5 push, and therefore Black should aim to disrupt the attacker's stability in the center as soon as possible.

As already noted in the 15...Qh4+ line, the most principled response 16.Bb6 will be analyzed below.

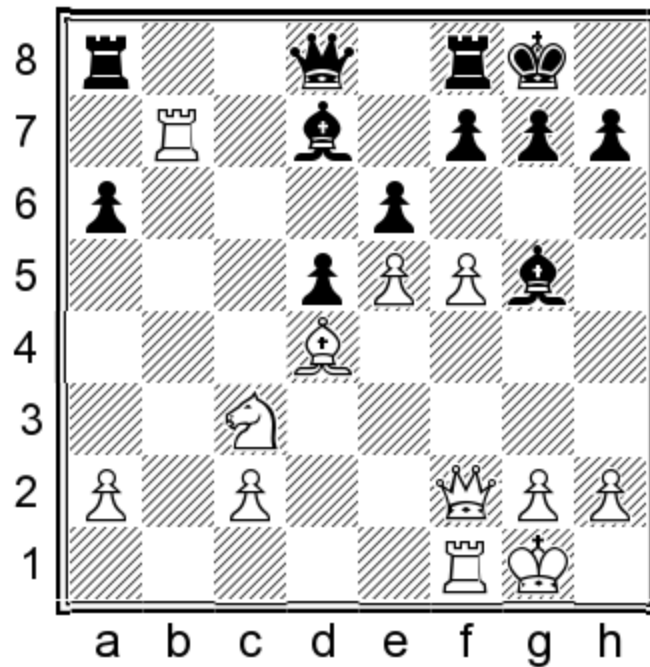
### **16...Qc8**

**A)** 16...Rb8? makes little sense since White has all the time they needed to take everything under control with 17.Rxb8 Qxb8 18.Rb1 Qc7 19.Qe3±, neutralizing the disruptive move ...Bc5, and intending f4-f5 next.

**B)** 16...Rc8 17.Qf2 transposes to the previous chapter on 15...Rc8.

**C)** 16...Be7? also fails to put enough pressure on White and after 17.f5 the familiar 17...Bg5 18.Qf2 0-0 maneuver

is not working anymore.

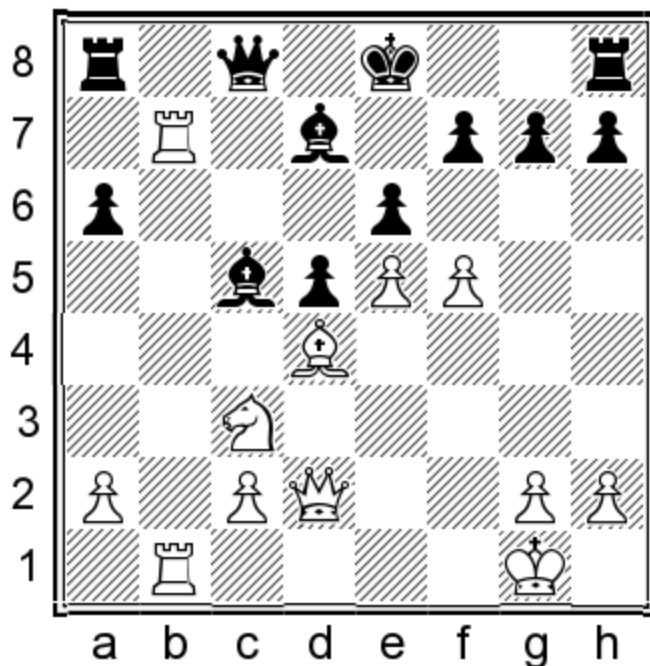


*Position after: 18...0-0*

You may remember a similar position from one of the informational lines from a previous chapter, but here White did not waste a tempo triangulating their queen via d2-e3-f2. One move is all it takes to make a great difference. 19.f6 gxf6 20.exf6 There are more suitable options for White but simple chess should work the best. 20...Kh8 21.Qg3 Rg8 22.Qd6 Be8 23.Qe5± Black is extremely passive and has to be on the constant lookout for subtle threats like Rc7-e7xe6 or even Qxe6. [The immediate 23.Qxe6!? gives Black a way out, exchanging queens for a pawn. Not a bad achievement for White but we should already be aiming for more.]

## 17.Rb3

Unfortunately, things start to get a bit complicated here from an academic point of view. Black seems to have enough resources to keep the balance with precise moves. Nonetheless, it is the second player who needs to prove they know how to neutralize White's various attempts!  
 17.Rfb1 Bc5 18.f5

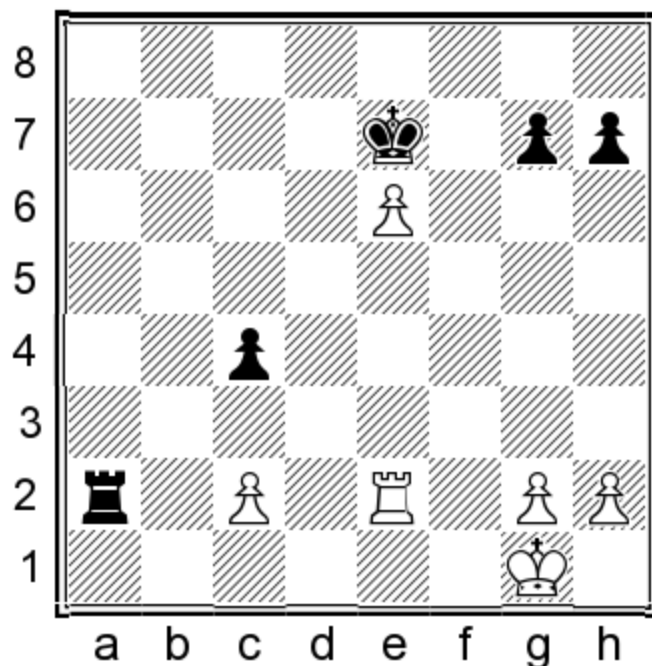


*Position after: 18.f5*

Things were looking quite bright for White in this line, though looking closer I was able to identify at least one big issue.

**A)** 18...Bxd4+ was played in Alekseenko – Christiansen, Khanty-Mansiysk 2019, and the game basically started in the following endgame. 19.Qxd4 Bb5 20.Rb6 0-0 21.a4 Qc4 22.Nxb5 axb5 23.Qxc4 bxc4 24.fxe6 fxe6 25.Ra1 Ra5 26.Rxe6 Rfa8 27.Rd6 Rxa4 28.Rxa4 Rxa4 29.Rxd5 Ra2 30.e6 Kf8 31.Rd2 Ke7 32.Re2<sup>2</sup> After a long fight Black

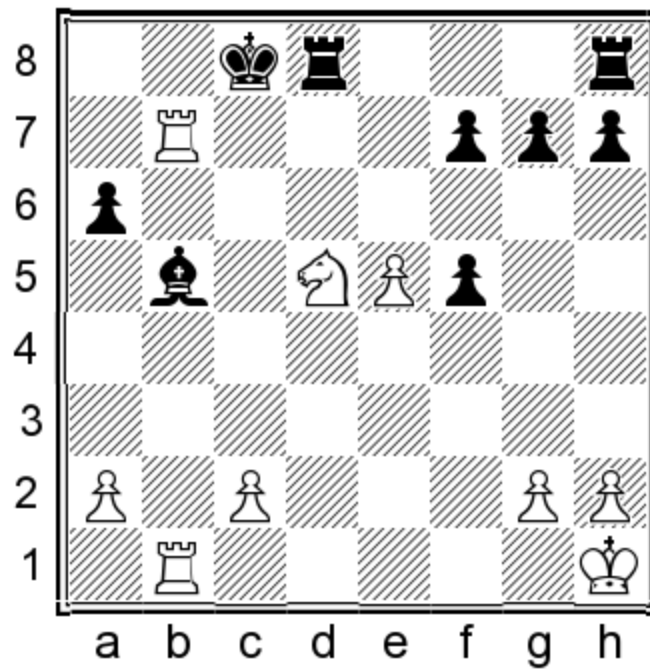
finally managed to defend successfully, never stepping over the edge of the cliff.



*Position after: 32.Re2<sup>2</sup>*

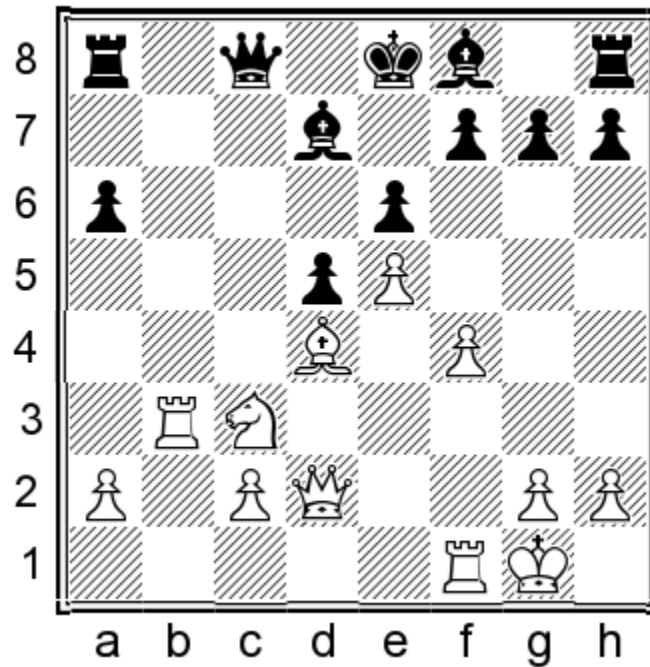
From a practical point of view there might be more chances for White in this endgame than in the one we are analyzing in the text.

**B)** 18...Bb5! 19.Bxc5 Qxc5+ 20.Kh1 exf5 21.Qxd5 Qxd5 22.Nxd5 0-0-0! One almost forgets such moves are legal when the white rook is on b7. Big simplifications are on the menu for Black and there is not much we can do about it.



*Position after: 22...0-0-0!*

23.Rc7+ Kb8 24.Rxf7 Rxd5 25.c4 Rxe5 26.cxb5 Rxb5  
 27.Rxb5+ axb5 28.Rxf5 Kc7 29.Rxb5 Ra8 30.Rb2 Kd6=  
 One can argue that White is still a pawn up, but if your opponent has successfully navigated all the way up until this point, you can be pretty sure they will manage to make a draw. White's pawn is too far back and both of White's pieces are in very passive positions.



*Position after: 17.Rb3*

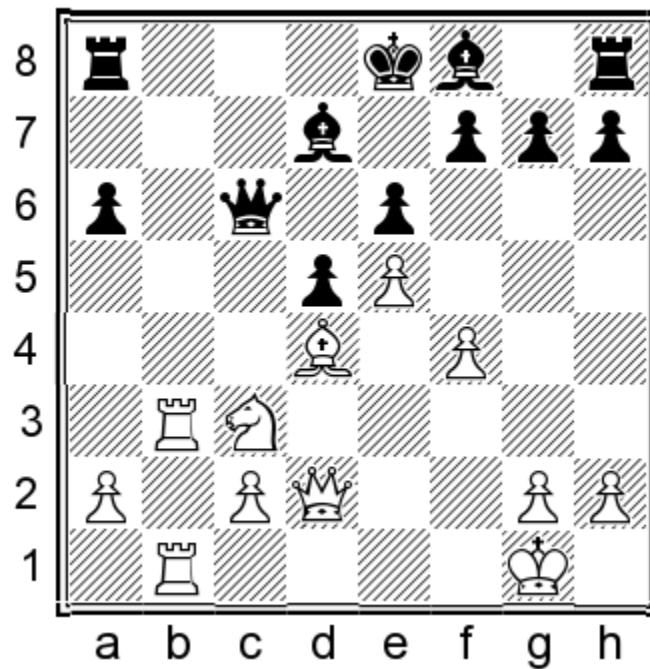
White's preparing to double the rooks is another possible try.

**17...Bc5**

Only this move equalizes comfortably.

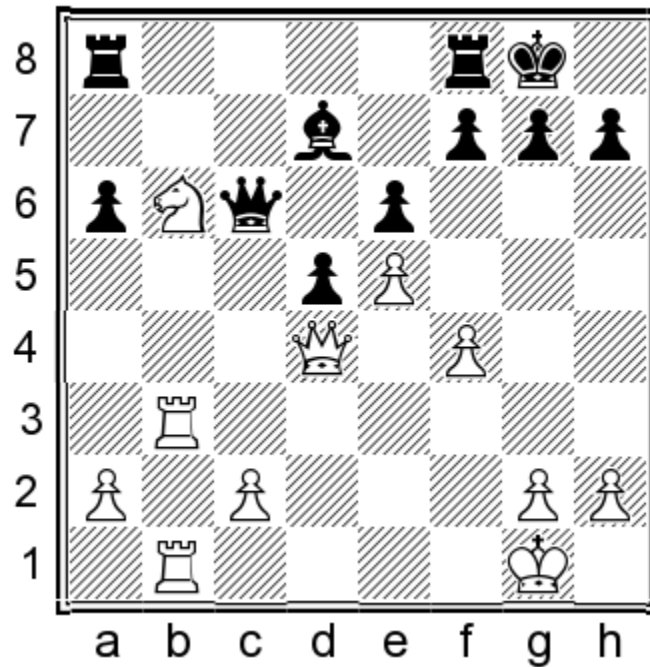
**A)** 17...Qc6, stopping White's f4-f5 (due to the d5-pawn being protected), is a bit lazy and slow. 18.Rfb1





*Position after: 18.Rfb1*

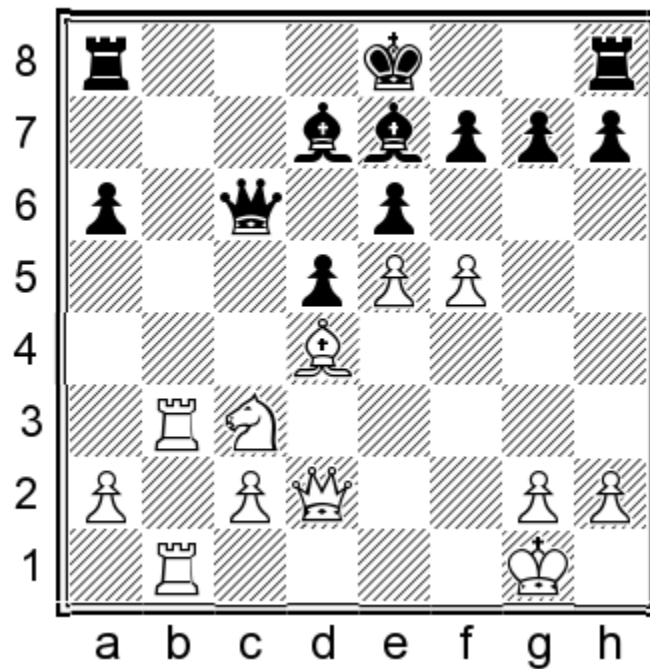
**A1)** The deferred 18...Bc5 unsurprisingly does not work as well as it did on move 17. 19.Na4! As always, being able to both force the dark-squared bishops off and consolidate the position in time should grant us a stable plus. 19...Bxd4+ 20.Qxd4 0-0 21.Nb6



*Position after: 21.Nb6*

21...Rad8 [21...Rab8? 22.Nxd5! Rxb3 23.Ne7+ is an important detail, leaving Black a pawn down after 23...Kh8 24.Rxb3 Qc7 25.Qd6±.] 22.Rc3 Qb7 23.a4<sup>2</sup> Prophylactically stopping ...Bb5. It is no walk in the park for Black to play such a passive position.

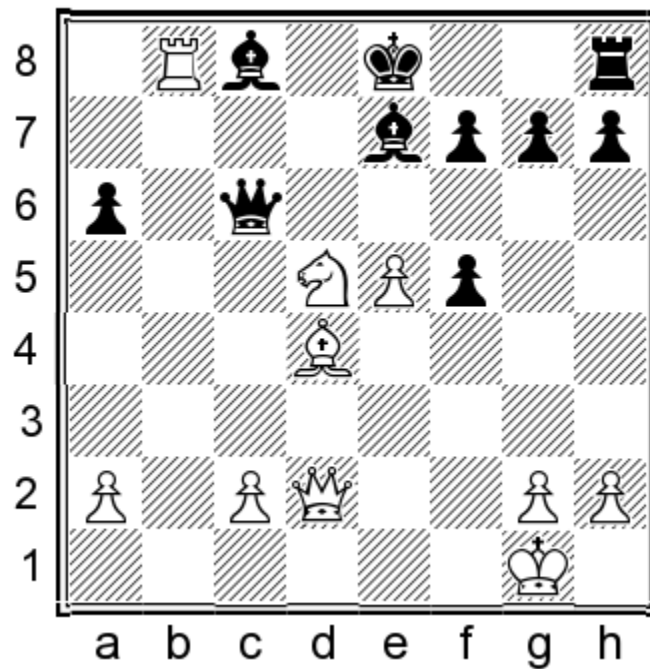
**A2)** 18...Be7 Now White is much better prepared thanks to the following tactical resource: 19.f5



*Position after: 19.f5*

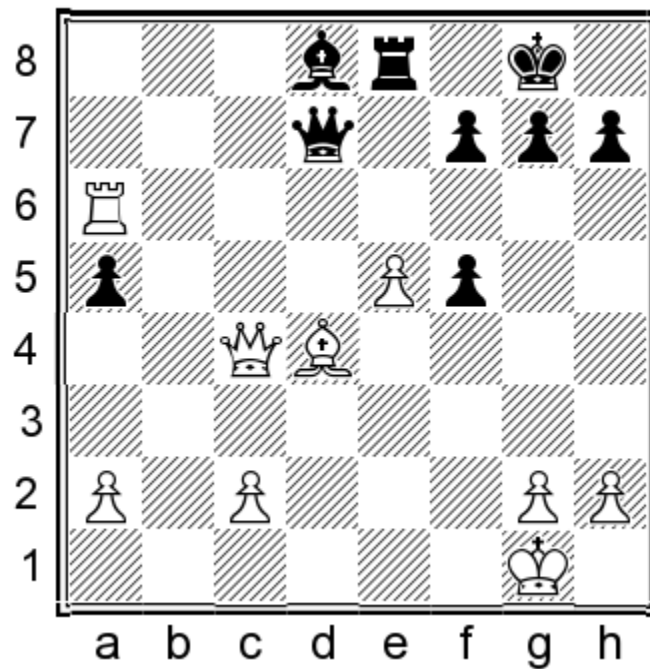
**A2.1)** 19...Rc8 20.f6 gxf6 21.exf6 Bf8 22.R1b2!<sup>2</sup> is extremely gloomy for Black once again. R1b2 cleverly prepared the maneuver Nc3-e2, looking for greener pastures for the knight as well as making room for the idea Rb3-c3.

**A2.2)** 19...exf5 20.Rb8+ Rxb8 21.Rxb8+ Bc8 22.Nxd5!



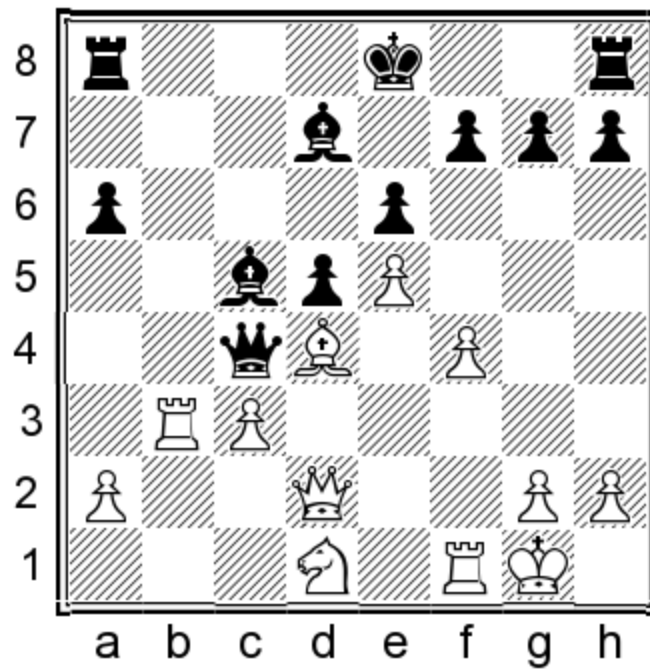
*Position after: 22.Nxd5!*

It's true Black has eventually managed to hide their king after 22...Qxd5 23.Rxc8+ Bd8 24.Qb4 a5 25.Qa4+ Qd7, but White keeps all the trumps thanks to their activity with 26.Rc6 (threatening e5-e6) 26...0-0 27.Qc4, e.g. 27...Re8 28.Ra6<sup>2</sup>, targeting both the a5-pawn and the 7th rank.



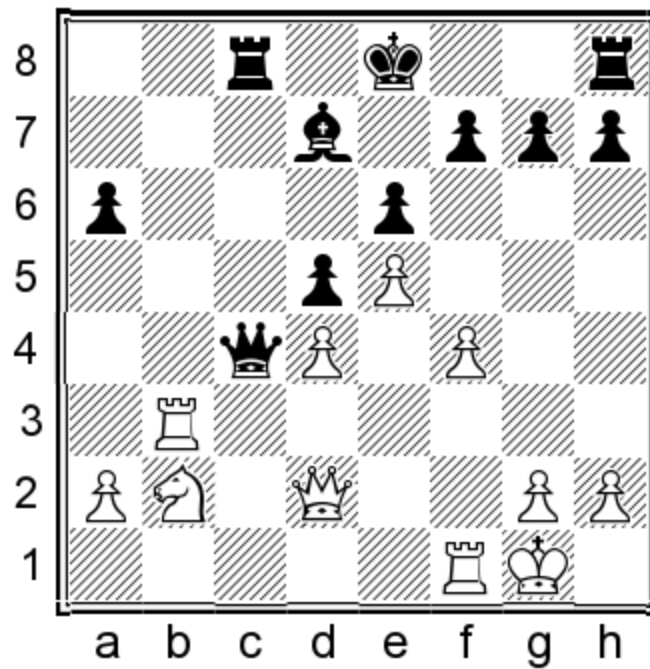
*Position after: 28.Ra6<sup>2</sup>*

**B)** 17...Qc4 is a more active way of overprotecting the d5-pawn, but the black queen is a bit more exposed. 18.Nd1! Once White manages to put the knight on e3 with tempo, and no force will be able to stop the f-pawn's crushing advance. Even if Black tries to mix it up a bit with 18...Bc5, White keeps everything under control. 19.c3



*Position after: 19.c3*

**B1)** 19...Rc8 could even provoke White to alter their plans a little and focus on the c-file instead with 20.Nb2! [Obviously, there is nothing wrong with 20.Ne3 Bxd4 21.cxd4 either, but we are not getting f4-f5 in so smoothly after 21...Qc6] 20...Bxd4+ 21.cxd4 If Black retreats their queen back down the c-file, it will have to go even further after the moves Nd3 and Rc1.

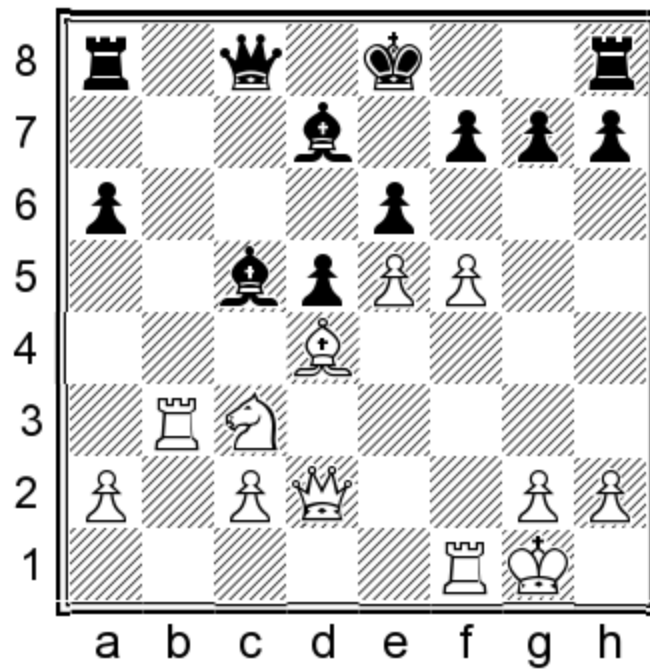


*Position after: 21.cxd4*

On the other hand, the endgame arising after 21...Qc2 22.Qxc2 Rxc2 23.Rb8+±, intending Nb2-d3-c5, brings them little relief.

**B2)** 19...0-0 20.Ne3 Bxd4 21.cxd4 Qc6 22.Rc1! pushing the queen away from the d5-pawn, thus making the f4-f5 advance even stronger 22...Qa4 23.f5±.

**18.f5**

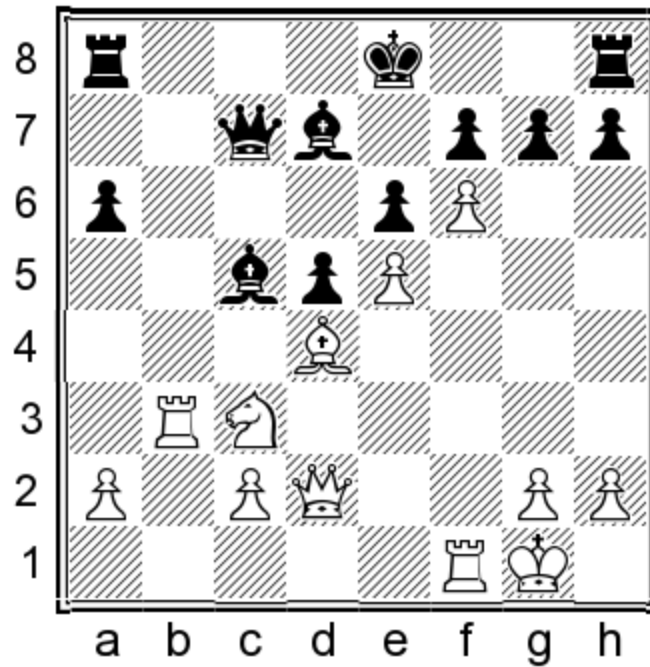


*Position after: 18.f5*

### **18...Bxd4+**

Another chance to go astray is 18...Qc7?!, as played in the correspondence game Sorokin – Schott, email 2017. 19.f6! Once again White manages to get their favorite dark-squared dominance here.





*Position after: 19.f6!*

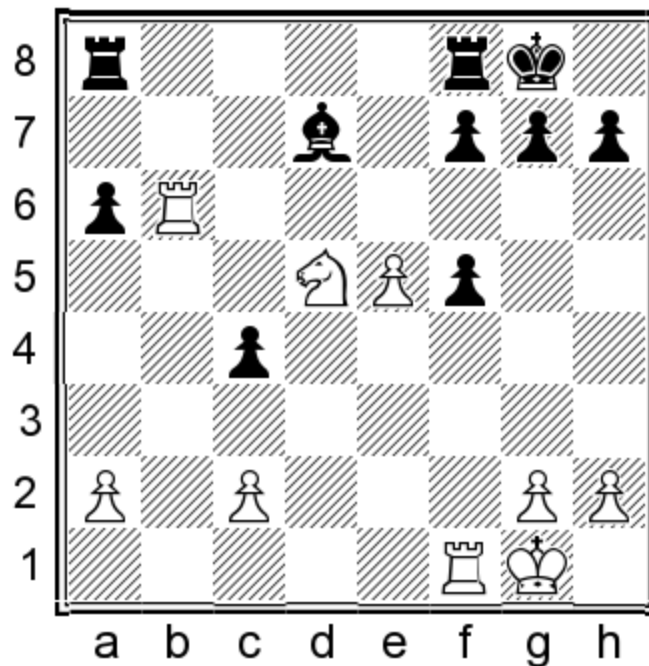
**A)** Black's passivity does not augur well after 19...Rg8 20.fxg7 Rxg7 21.Bxc5 Qxc5+ 22.Rf2 Rc8 23.h3<sup>2</sup>. White can toy with the Nd1-e3-g4 maneuver, exploiting the f6-weakness in Black's camp (possibly starting with moving their king away from the a7-g1 diagonal).

**B)** 19...gxf6 20.Rxf6 Bxd4+ 21.Qxd4 Rc8 22.Rf2 Rg8 23.Qe3<sup>2</sup> The dust has settled and Black's pieces are not going anywhere. Their dark-squared weaknesses will remain for a very long time.

### **19.Qxd4 Qc4!**

This is the key move, leading to a one-in-a-million endgame where Black actually manages to keep the balance.

**20.Qxc4 dxc4 21.Rb6 exf5 22.Nd5 0-0=**



*Position after: 22...0-0=*

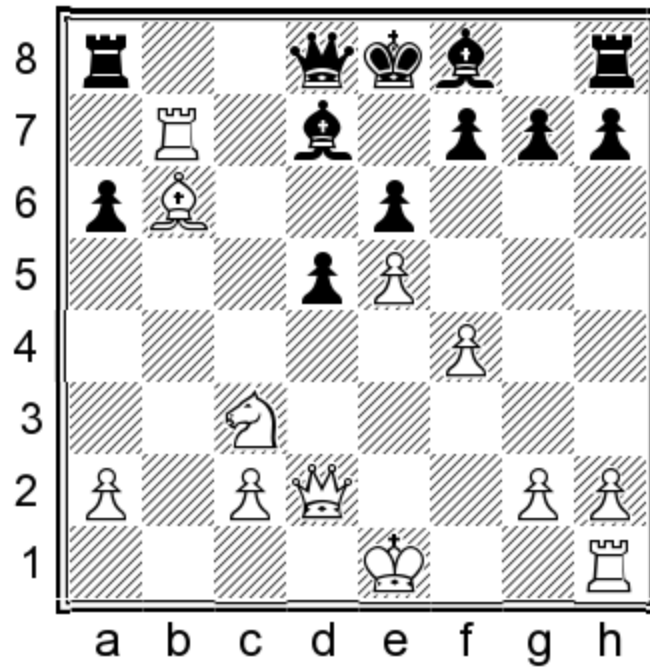
In conclusion, with correct play Black can equalize in this line, although it is no easy task.

**c) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qh4+?**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7  
15.Rxb7 Qd8**

The same position can be reached via the move order 15...Qh4+ 16.Bf2 Qd8 17.Bb6 as well, thus reducing your workload in absolute numbers. Nevertheless, I think it is worthwhile to study the previous half of the chapter as the h4-check can be considered a slight imprecision.

**16.Bb6!**



*Position after: 16.Bb6!*

**16...Qh4+?**

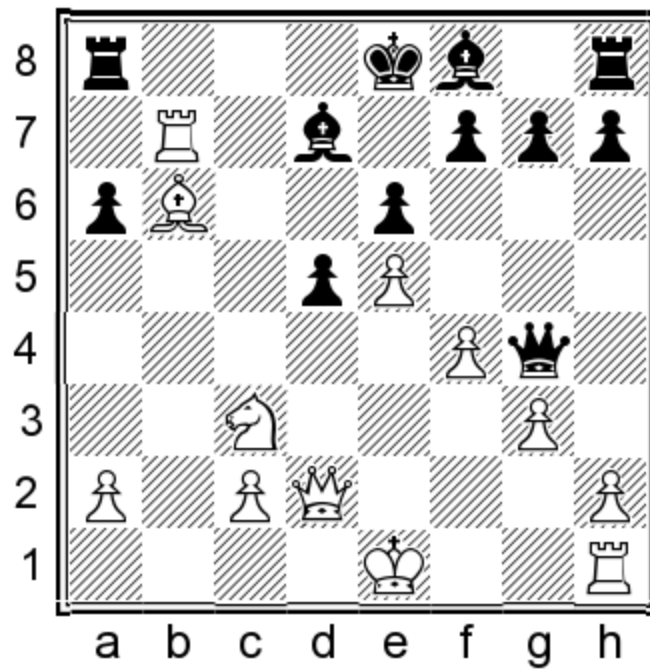
This unspoken draw offer should be firmly rejected.

**17.g3**

as things tend to escalate quite quickly afterwards.

**17...Qh3**

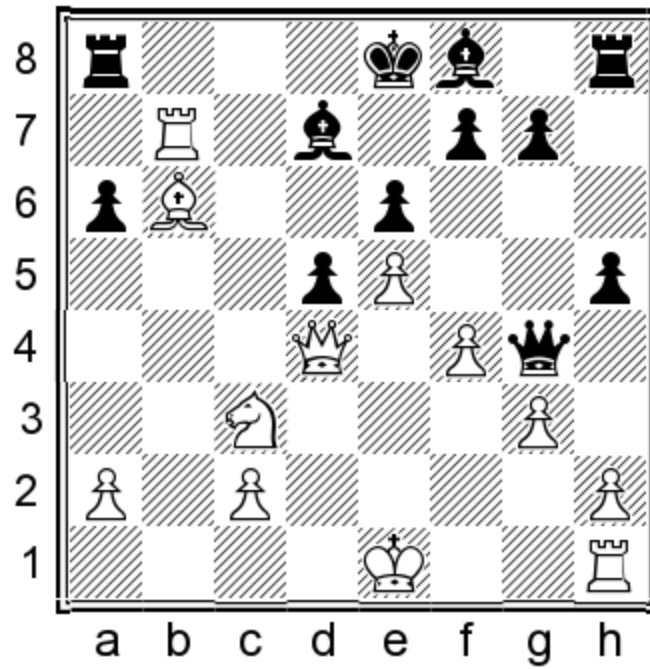
17...Qg4



*Position after: 17...Qg4*

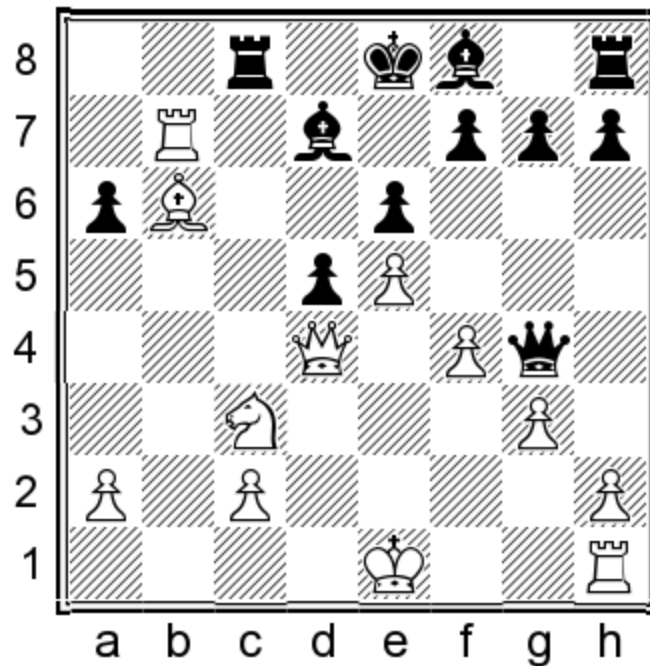
18.Qd4! [It would be one move too early for the typical 18.Rxd7? Kxd7 19.Nxd5 sacrifice due to 19...Qf3!. White should get one step closer to the killer check on a4 first.]

18...Rc8 This is the most promising defense, although it still basically loses if White responds correctly. [Please note that White's last move set up the subtle threat of capturing on d7, e.g. 18...h5?



*Position after: 18...h5?*

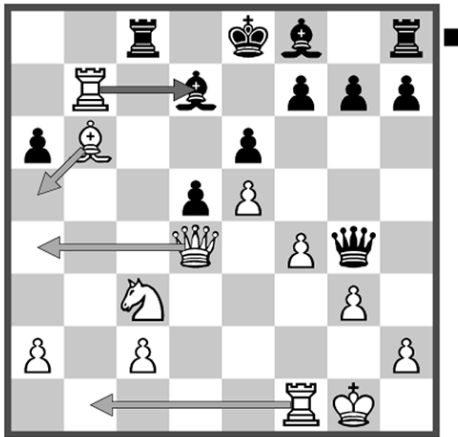
19.Rxd7! Kxd7 20.Nxd5 exd5 21.Qxd5++-, where White will regain the sacrificed material with interest.]



*Position after: 18...Rc8*

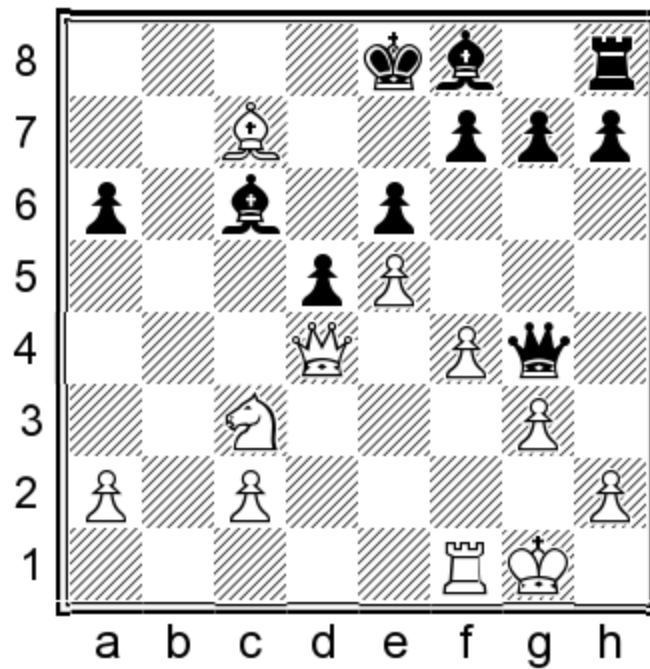
**A)** As an exception we should forget about 19.Rxd7?! for a brief moment as Black is capable of starting some counter-fireworks after 19...Kxd7 20.Qa4+ Rc6 21.Qxa6 Rxb6! 22.Qxb6 Qf3= when all the action should peter out into a perpetual.

**B)** 19.0-0!



*Position after: 19.0-0!*

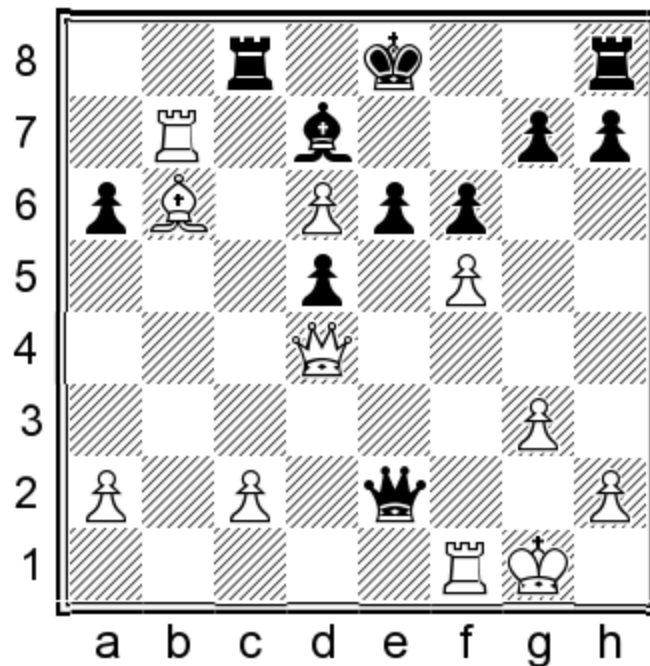
**B1)** If Black does not start working on evacuating their king immediately, the attacker's task gets even simpler – 19...Bc6 20.Rc7! Rxc7 21.Bxc7 is simply horrible.



*Position after: 21.Bxc7*

White's queen will plunder the eastern lands of Black's realm using the help of some little tactics after 21...Ba3 22.Qb6 Kd7 23.Na4!!, with 23...Bxa4 24.Bd6 Bxd6 25.Qxd6+ Kc8 26.Qxa6++- in mind.

**B2)** 19...Be7 should be compared to a similar variation in the 19...h5 line. Here Black really misses the extra tempo. 20.Ne4! Qe2 21.Nd6+ Bxd6 22.exd6 f6 23.f5

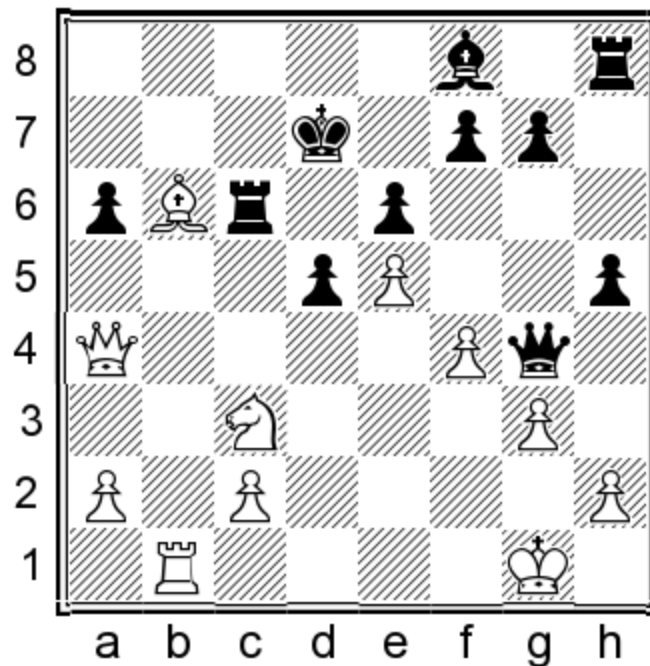


*Position after: 23.f5*

with a crushing initiative in the center, for example 23...h5 24.Ba5!, preparing the little yet decisive Rf1-e1 maneuver. Note that 24...Rxc2 25.Rf2 Qxf2+ 26.Qxf2 Rxf2 27.Kxf2+- is completely hopeless for Black.

**B3)** 19...h5 requires the direct 20.Rxd7!. [20.Ne4? does not work so well in comparison with the 19...Be7 line anymore. The problem is 20...Qe2 21.Nd6+ Bxd6 22.exd6 f6 23.f5 h4! when Black manages to generate enough counterplay just in time.] 20...Kxd7 21.Qa4+ Rc6 22.Rb1!





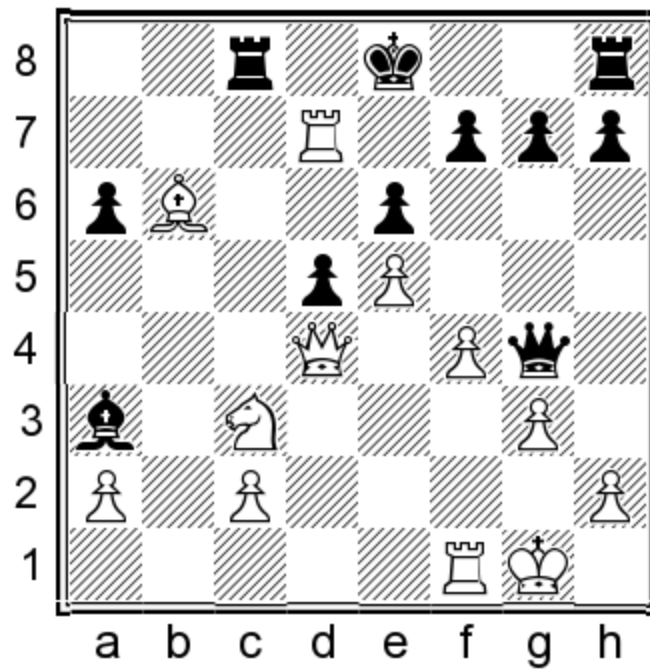
*Position after: 22.Rb1!*

It turns out Black is unable to stop White's rook from joining the attack via the b-file as their pieces are very poorly coordinated.

**B3.1)** 22...h4 23.Bf2!+- is the winning move here. [As a matter of fact any square on the a7-g1 diagonal should suffice. The point is that 23.Ba5?? is now losing to 23...Bc5+ 24.Kg2 h3+!-+.]

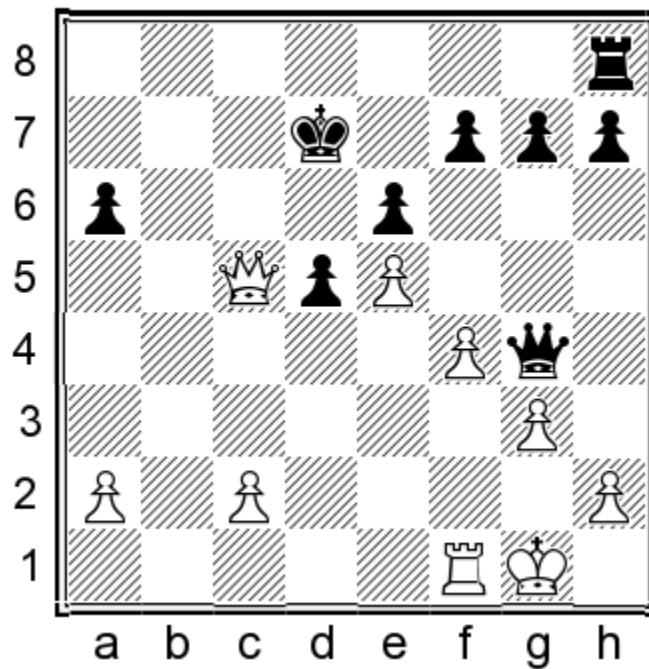
**B3.2)** 22...Be7 23.Ba5! There is no real need to protect the long diagonal anymore, as it is the a5-d8 one that matters now. 23...Rhc8 24.Rb7+ Ke8 25.Bc7!+- One could easily miss such a cute move, especially from a distance. Black is losing at least a rook.

**B4)** 19...Ba3 20.Rxd7!



*Position after: 20.Rxd7!*

Once again, a well-timed sacrifice crushes Black's dreams of castling. 20...Kxd7 21.Qa4+ Rc6 22.Qxa3 Rxb6 23.Na4! Black's rook essentially becomes overloaded here, having to defend both the b-file and the d6-square. 23...Rc6 24.Nc5+ Rxc5 [24...Kc8 25.Qb4+- leads to an immediate checkmate.] 25.Qxc5



*Position after: 25.Qxc5*

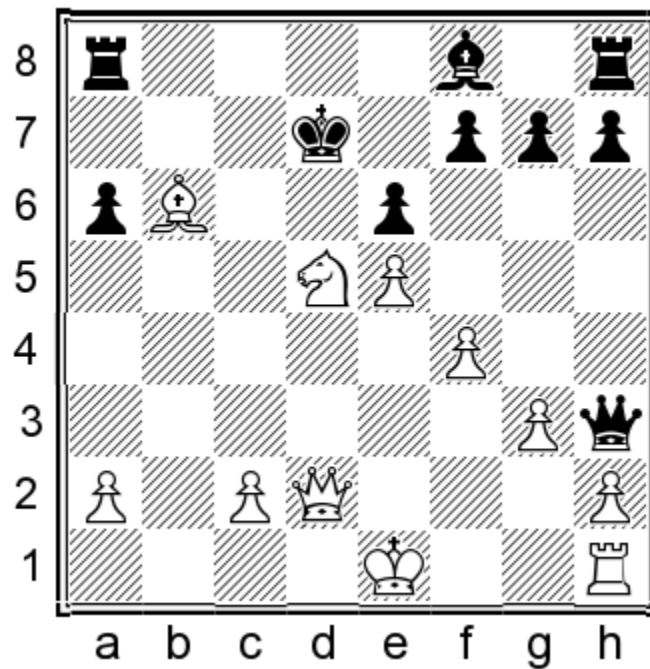
**B4.1)** Otherwise Black cannot put up any resistance at all, e.g. 25...Rd8? 26.Rb1 Ke8 27.Kf2!+-. White is ready to finish Black off with Rb7, while even if Black were to capture the h2 pawn, the white king would easily run to safety on the other side of the board.

**B4.2)** 25...Rc8 26.Qd6+ Ke8 27.Qxa6± Black managed not to lose on the spot but I see no light for them at the end of this grim endgame.

### **18.Rxd7!**

Conversely, with Black's queen on h3 the immediate rook sacrifice works brilliantly, the main difference being the absence of the ...Qg4-f3 (or ...Qh3-g2) trick we saw before.

### **18...Kxd7 19.Nxd5**

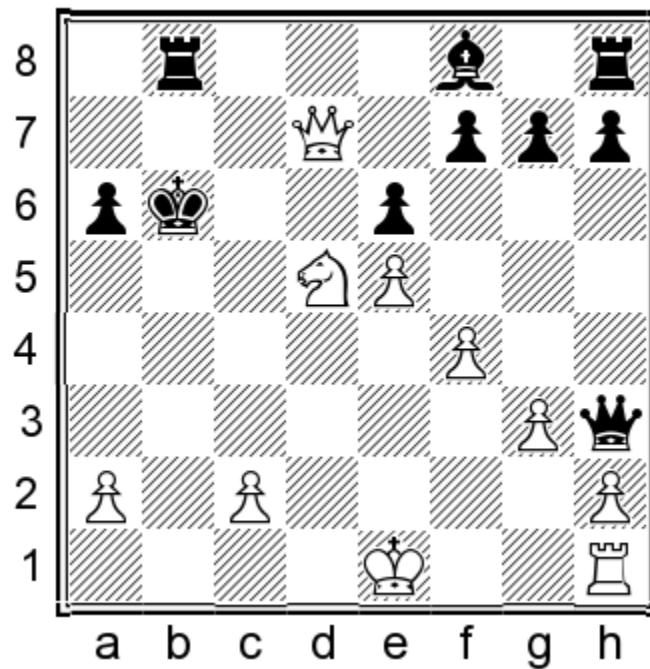


*Position after: 19.Nxd5*

Although Black's position is already lost, it is quite handy to know how to respond to their two possible tries. Mixing up which piece to put on d7 could ruin all your previous efforts as White.

### **19...Rc8**

19...Rb8 requires you to play Qd7+. 20.Nf6+ Kc6 21.Qd7+ [21.Nd7? Rxb6! is the first line you can use as a hint to remember the solution correctly.] 21...Kxb6 22.Nd5+! The knight is taboo as Black's queen is pinned.



*Position after: 22.Nd5+!*

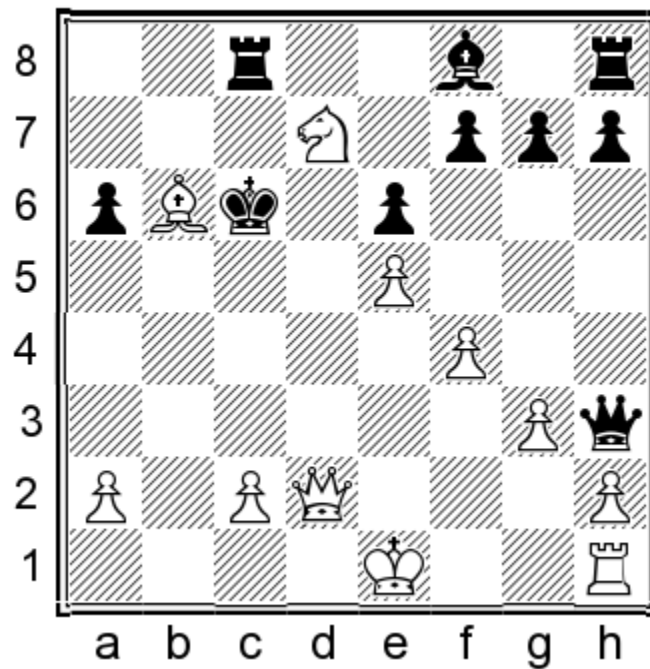
22...Kc5 [And 22...Ka5 23.Qc7+!+- is the other significant difference - the c7-square is not defended anymore.]

23.Kf2!+- Sidestepping Black's only threat of ...Rb1+ makes the defender completely helpless and White's last piece is ready to join the fight via d1 or b1. If Black just says "pass" somehow, Nd5-e3 is an immediate killer.

**20.Nf6+ Kc6 21.Nd7!!**

Since Black's rook is just passively defending on c8, White will finish them off with slow play, exploiting Black's absolute discoordination.

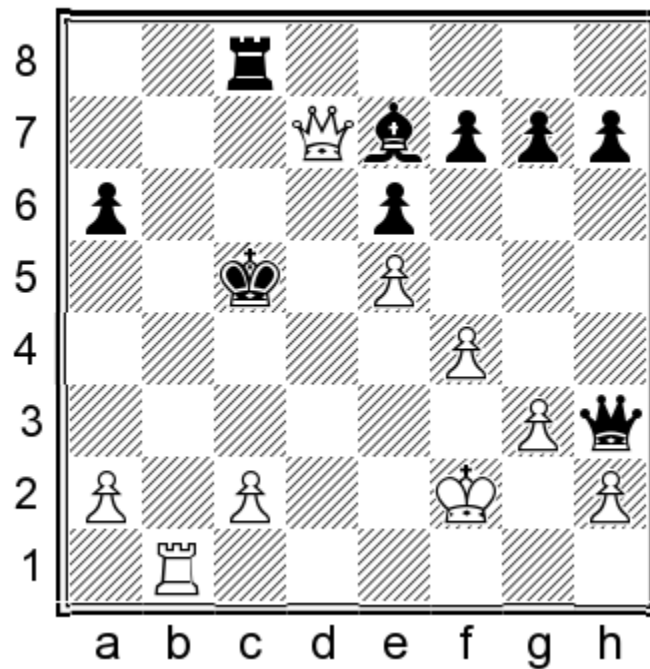
21.Qd7+?? would be a horrible mix up since after 21...Kxb6 22.Nd5+ Ka5-+ White's queen cannot access the desired c7-square anymore.



*Position after: 21.Nd7!!*

### **21...Kb7**

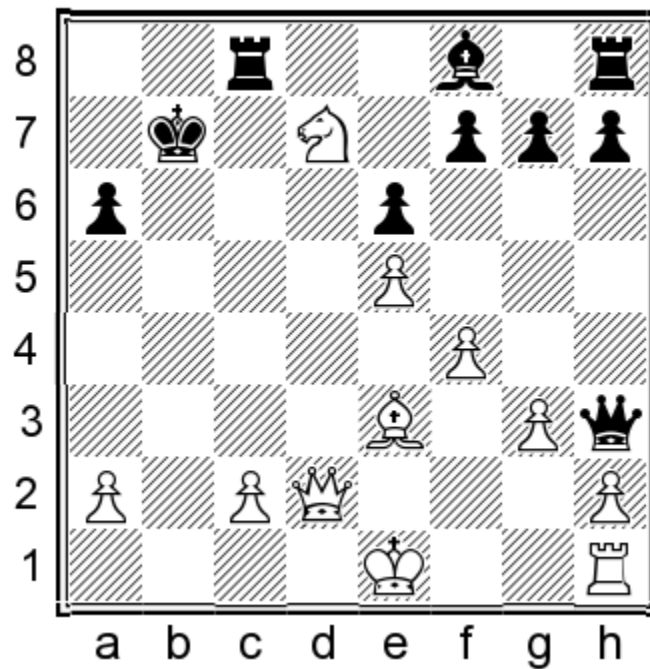
**A)** 21...Be7 gives us enough time to bring the rook into the action with 22.Kf2! Rhd8 23.Qd4! Eyeing the a4-square again. The Qd4-a4 maneuver is definitely one of the key motifs in this variation. 23...Rxd7 24.Qa4+ Kxb6 25.Rb1+ Kc5 26.Qxd7



*Position after: 26.Qxd7*

Black cannot defend all of their hanging pieces and some spite checks will not change much. 26...Qxh2+ 27.Kf3 Qh5+ 28.Ke3+- **B)** 21...Qf5 22.Qg2+ Kb5 23.0-0+- will be over quickly.

**22.Be3!**



*Position after: 22.Be3!*

Here the Qg2+ resource loses its sting, so we need to be ready for ...Qf5.

## **22...Be7**

22...Qf5 23.Qd4! Rc7 24.Qa7+ Kc6 25.Nb8+ +- is the point, which should be, as usual, compared with the main line, which offers more stubborn defense, to best understand all the subtleties.

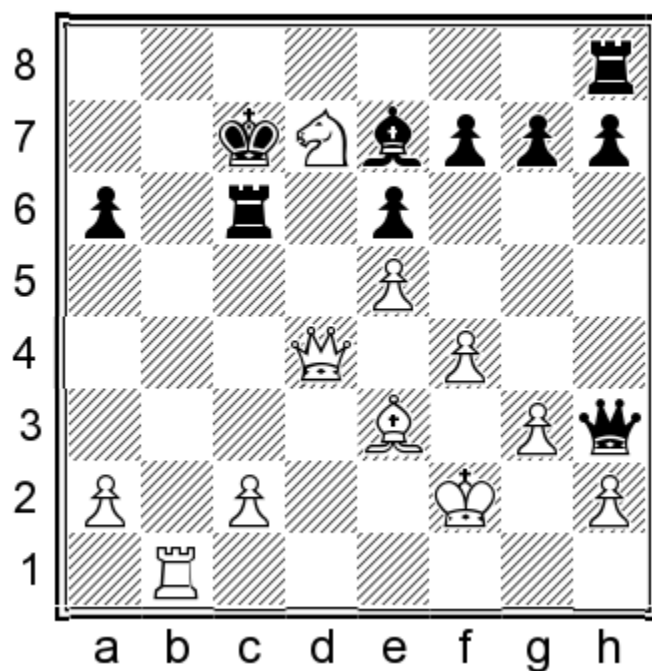
## **23.Kf2!**

Admittedly there are a lot of exclamation-marked moves White has to play. Should you face such positions in a practical game though, it should be joyful even to have to find them yourselves if you do not manage to remember all the details.



23.Qd4? Rc7 24.Qa7+ Kc6∞ is somehow holding thanks to the b8-square being protected.

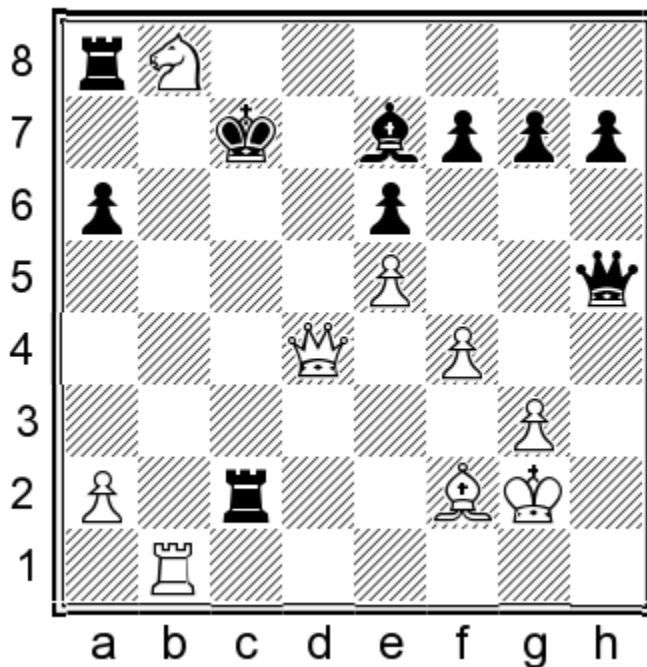
**23...Rc6 24.Rb1+ Kc7 25.Qd4!**



*Position after: 25.Qd4!*

As always, Black has just a couple of harmless checks while their overloaded defense cannot stop the onslaught.

**25...Qxh2+ 26.Kf3 Qh5+ 27.Kg2 Ra8 28.Nb8! Rxc2+**

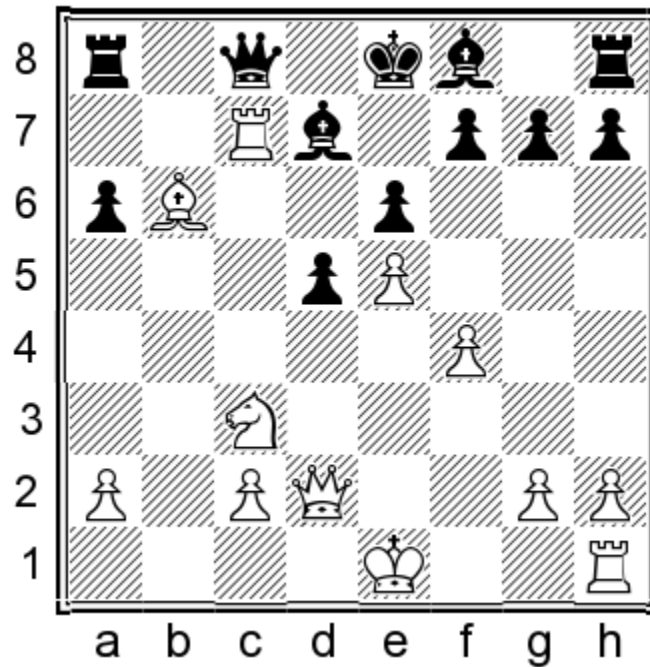


**29.Bf2+-**

*Position after: 29.Bf2+- And finally it's all over.*

**d) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! --**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7  
15.Rxb7 Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7**



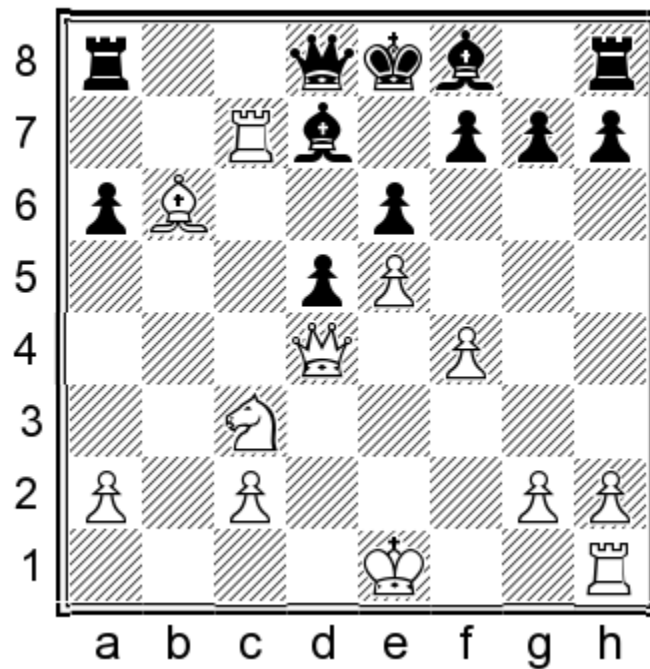
*Position after: 17.Rc7*

### **17...Qd8**

Compared to the previous draw offer of ...Qh4+, this time Black's hidden offer of a repetition is the best defense and the main theoretical battleground.

17...Qb8 18.Qd4± is not challenging for White at all. Black has to protect the d7-bishop to be able to castle.

### **18.Qd4!**

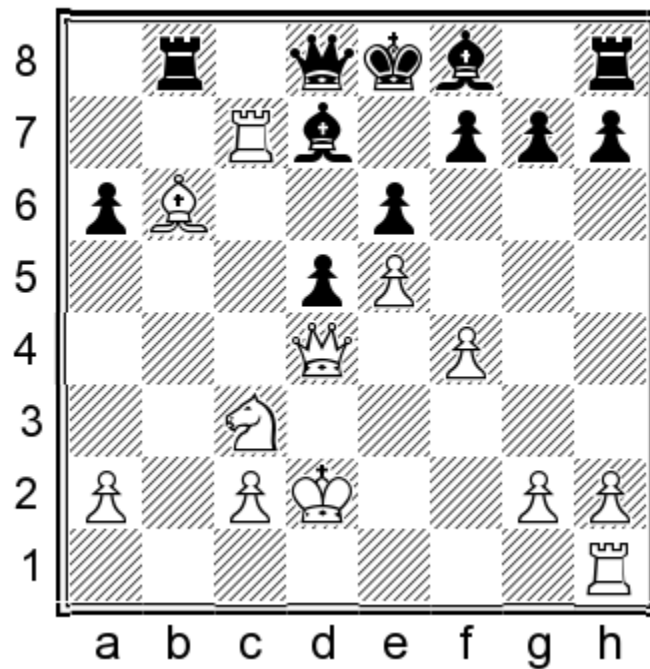


*Position after: 18.Qd4!*

The queen is both stopping the annoying ...Bb4 pin and supporting the b6-bishop. The latter fact might come in handy especially if White needs to utilize the Bb6 & Rc7 discovered attack later.

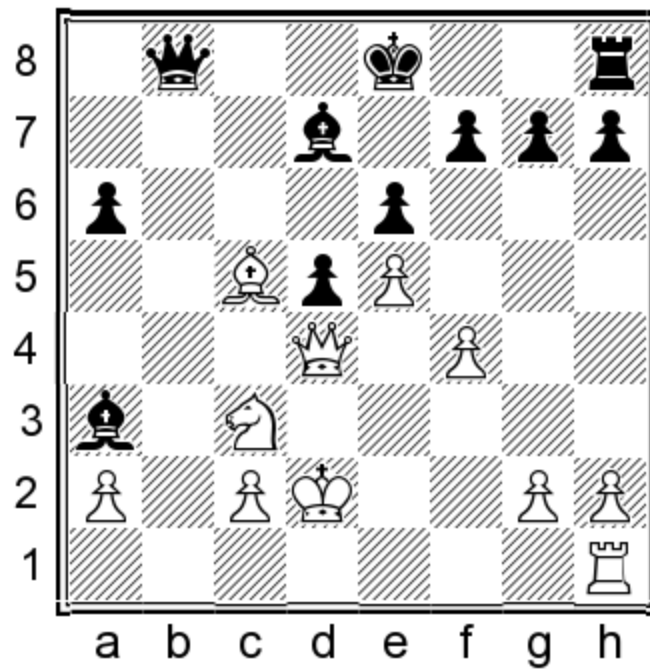
### **18...Rc8**

18...Rb8? is a cheap move. Black's position is clearly inferior after 19.Kd2!. The rook move does not address the defender's development problems at all while Kd2 improves White's coordination quite dramatically, both giving stability to the c3-knight and getting ready to bring the h1-rook into play. [The only thing Black was waiting for was 19.0-0? Rc8! with the idea of 20.Rc6?? Rxc6! 21.Bxd8 Bc5-+.]



*Position after: 19.Kd2!*

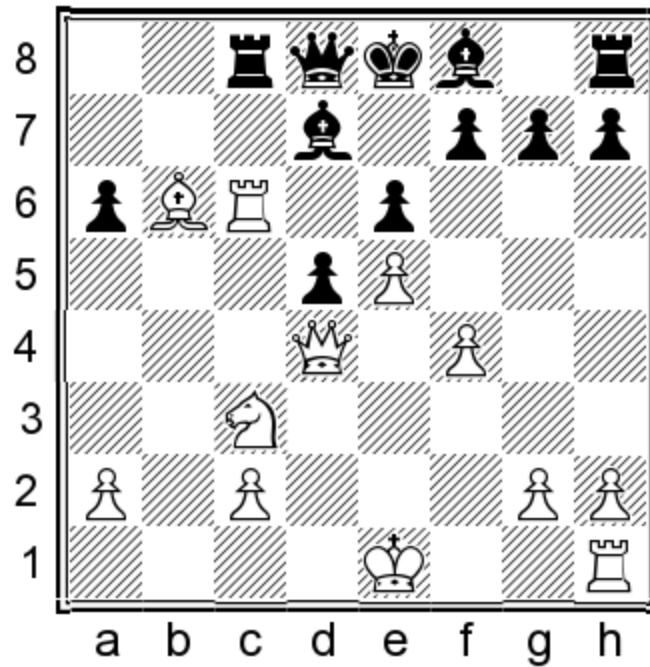
19...Ba3 [19...Be7 20.Rc6!+- is a nice queen trap by the R&B band.; 19...Rc8 would be pointless without the possibility of the ...Bc5 pin and 20.Rc6 Qe7 21.Rxc8+ Bxc8 22.Rb1+- leaves Black underdeveloped and practically lost.] 20.Rb7 Qc8 21.Rxb8 Qxb8 22.Bc5!



*Position after: 22.Bc5!*

White does not mind exchanging into a knight vs bishop endgame at all, but on the other hand Black can hardly afford to keep their king in the center, for example 22...Bb2 23.Rf1± will see White gradually improving their position with Rf3-g3, while Black's counterplay is nonexistent.

Here White should not fear winning some material with 19.Rc6!



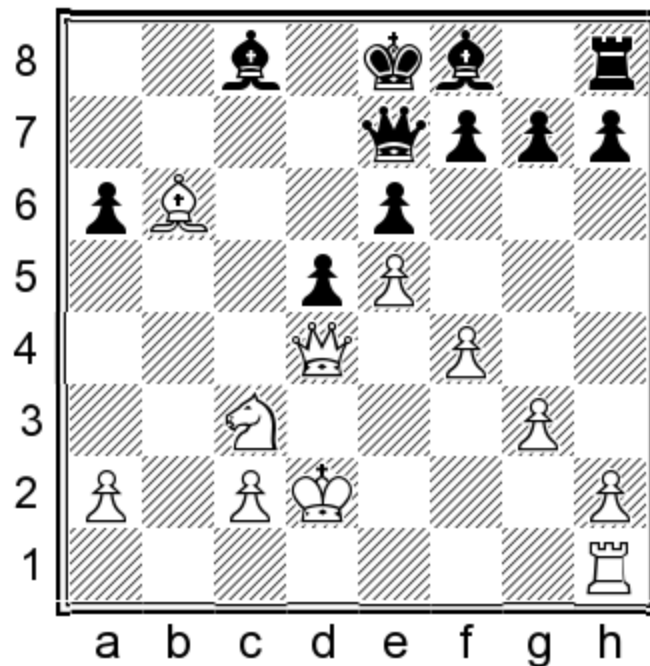
*Position after: 19.Rc6!*

It might seem as if Black has decent compensation for the queen at first sight but, objectively, White is simply better.

### **19...Rxc6**

**A)** Black's pieces look horribly clumsy in the case of 19...Qe7 20.Rxc8+ Bxc8 21.Kd2±.

**B)** Or 19...Qh4+ 20.g3 Qe7 21.Rxc8+ Bxc8 22.Kd2!

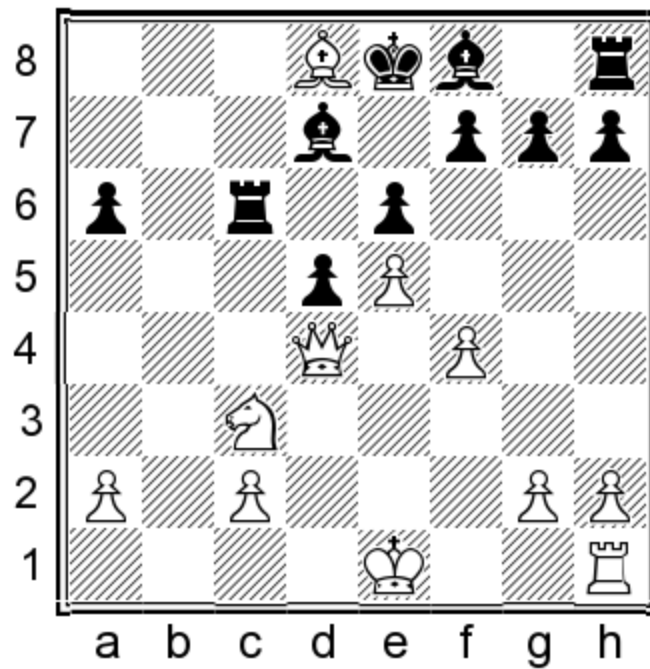


*Position after: 22.Kd2!*

(in the previous line castling short can be considered as well, but here White should foresee the danger of a future ...h5-h4 push) 22...h5 [White's plan is simple – Rb1, Na4, developing a devastating initiative on the queenside. Simplifications do not ease the defender's task: 22...Qb4 23.Rb1 Qxd4+ 24.Bxd4 Kd8 25.Na4<sup>2</sup> is quite awful.] 23.Rb1 h4 24.g4!<sup>±</sup> White has no reason to allow their opponent to open up the h-file and while their opponent still struggles to find any source of counterplay, they are fully ready for the Na4 queenside invasion.

**20.Bxd8**



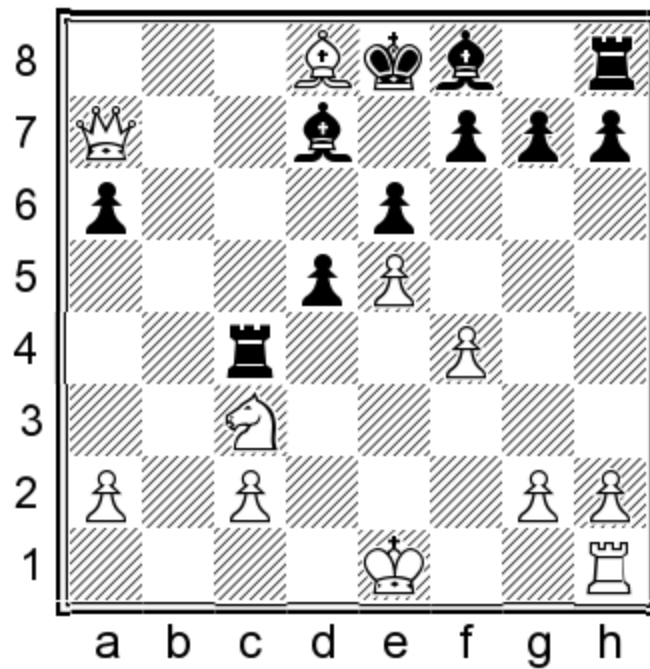


*Position after: 20.Bxd8*

While it's true White's dark squares are a bit vulnerable right now, with the right amount of precision they will be able to claim a sizeable edge.

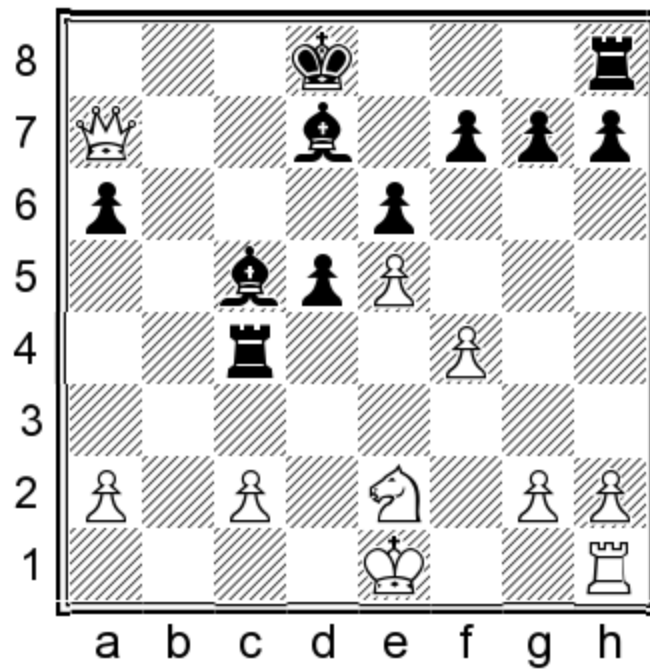
## **20...Bc5**

**A)** 20...Kxd8 21.Na4!, stopping ...Bc5, nips Black's counterplay in the bud. 21...Rxc2 22.0-0+- **B)** The big drawback of 20...Rc4 is that it lets the attacking queen past Black's defenses. 21.Qa7!



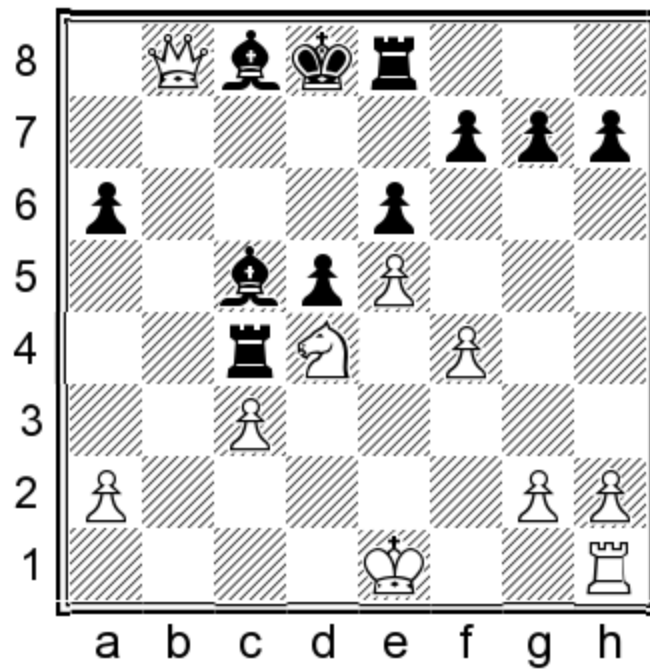
*Position after: 21.Qa7!*

21...Kxd8 [21...Bb4 is even worse since White manages to keep their strong dark-squared bishop while, due to the Qa7's presence, Black's king will be unable to castle. 22.Bb6 Bxc3+ 23.Kf2+- with Rb1 coming on the next move.] 22.Ne2 Retaining a big advantage is a much simpler task here compared to the critical move 20...Bc5. In this case natural moves do the job well. 22...Bc5 [22...Rxc2 23.Qxa6±]



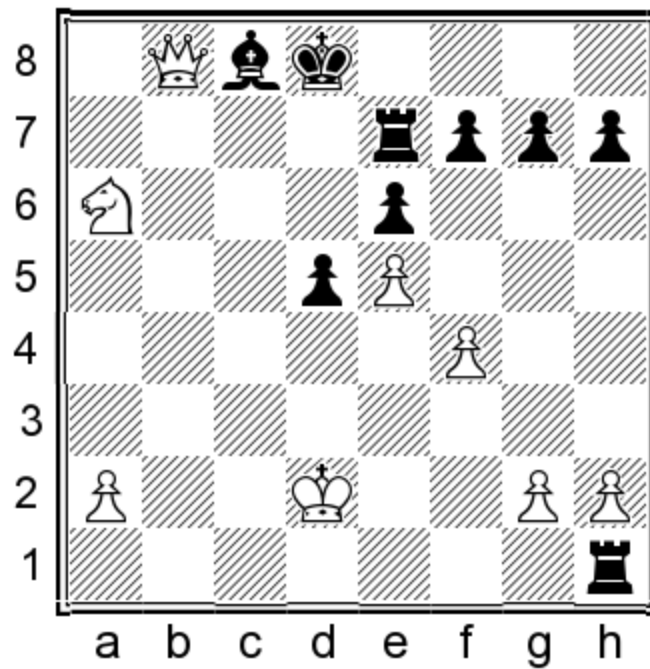
*Position after: 22...Bc5*

23.Qb8+! GM Negi's recommendation is the strongest continuation here although Black is already in deep water after other moves too. [The simple and standard 23.Qa8+ Bc8 24.Kd2±, planning Rb1, keeps a great edge as well.] 23...Bc8 24.c3 Re8 25.Nd4!



*Position after: 25.Nd4!*

This is the key move, White is pushing for immediate action, not losing time on Kd2. 25...Rxc3 [Note that 25...Bxd4? 26.cxd4 Rc1+?? 27.Kd2 Rxh1 28.Qb6+ leads to a checkmate!] 26.Nb3! Black is obliged to give up their precious c5-bishop for the passive h1-rook, when White's queen and knight tandem will unleash hell on the black king. 26...Re7 27.Nxc5 Rc1+ 28.Kd2 Rxh1 29.Nxa6±



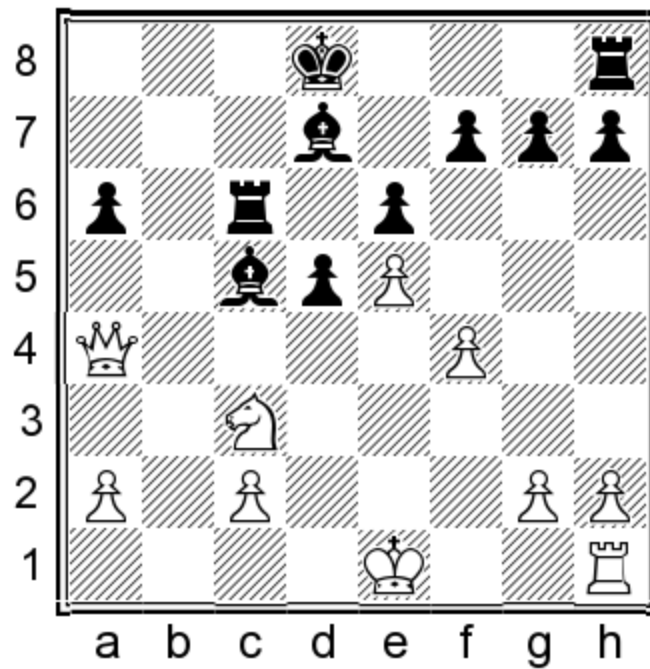
*Position after: 29.Nxa6±*

Very soon White's knight will be exchanged for the e7-rook and they will face a joyful technical task again.

## **21.Qa4!**

Mentally it is quite difficult to make one's queen susceptible to the potential ...Bd7 discovered attack, so you should study this line seriously.

## **21...Kxd8**



*Position after: 21...Kxd8*

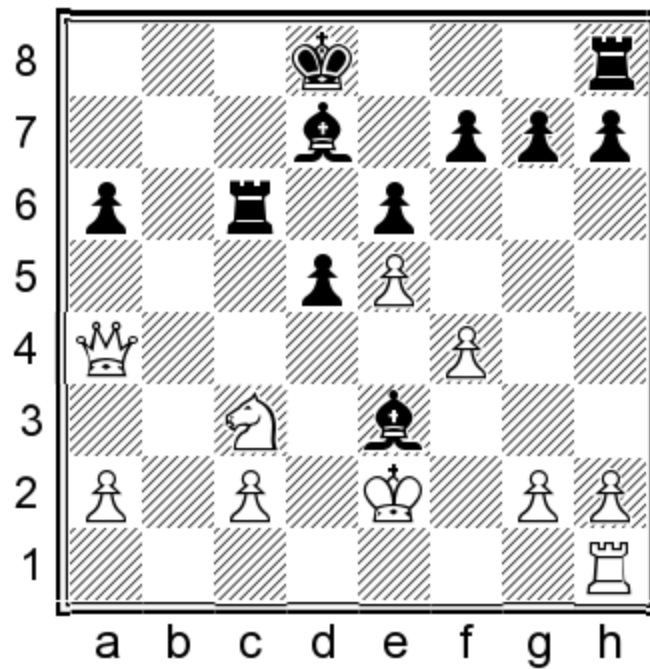
## **22.Kd2!**

White is getting ready to bring their rook into the center, whilst at the same time reinforcing the knight's position.

The immediate 22.Ke2?! Ke7 23.Rb1 Rd8 24.Qa5 is an imprecision due to 24...Bd4! when White loses the c2-pawn.

## **22...Ke7**

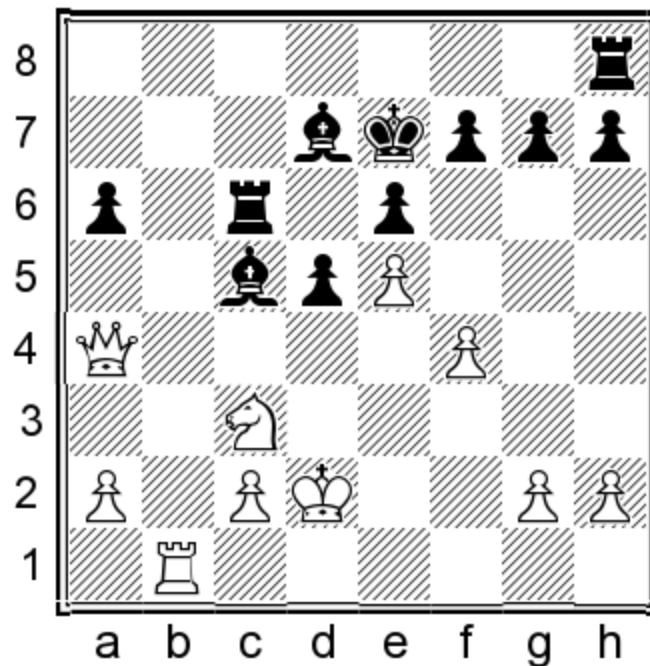
22...Be3+ 23.Ke2! will most likely just be a loss of precious time for Black. Black cannot really utilize their e3-outpost in any way.



*Position after: 23.Ke2!*

E.g. 23...Ke7 24.Rb1 Rhc8 25.Rb7. Since White is already threatening to capture on d7 and then on e3, Black either has to retreat their bishop or try something like 25...Bxf4 26.Qxf4 Rxc3 27.Qg5+ Ke8 28.Qxg7 Rxc2+ 29.Ke1±. Either way they are on the verge of being lost.

**23.Rb1**



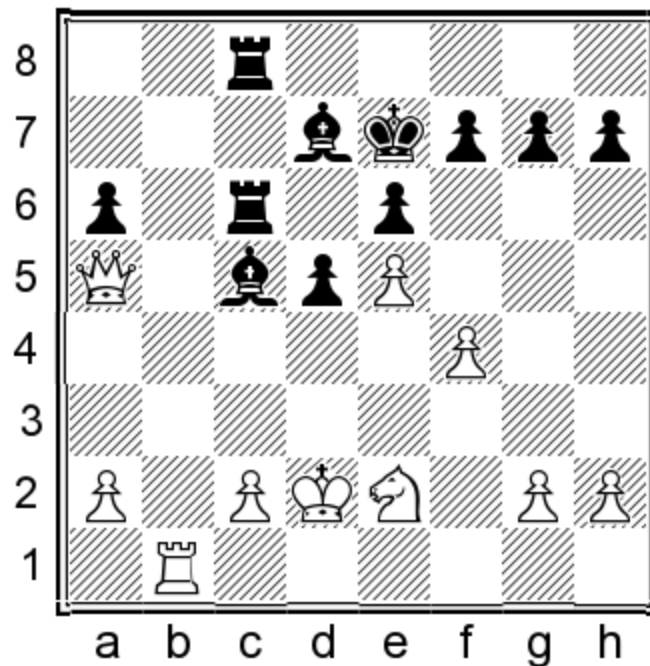
*Position after: 23.Rb1*

The most important thing here is to stay calm. Whoever breaks the Qa4-Rc6-Bd7 tension too soon is going to lose!

### **23...Rhc8**

23...Rd8 is quite a mysterious move and we need to make an exception to our rule about the tension here. 24.Qa5! [24.Rb7? Rb6! $\infty$  shows the point of 23...Rd8 nicely - Black was preparing to meet Rb7 with this nasty discovery.]  
24...Rdc8 25.Ne2





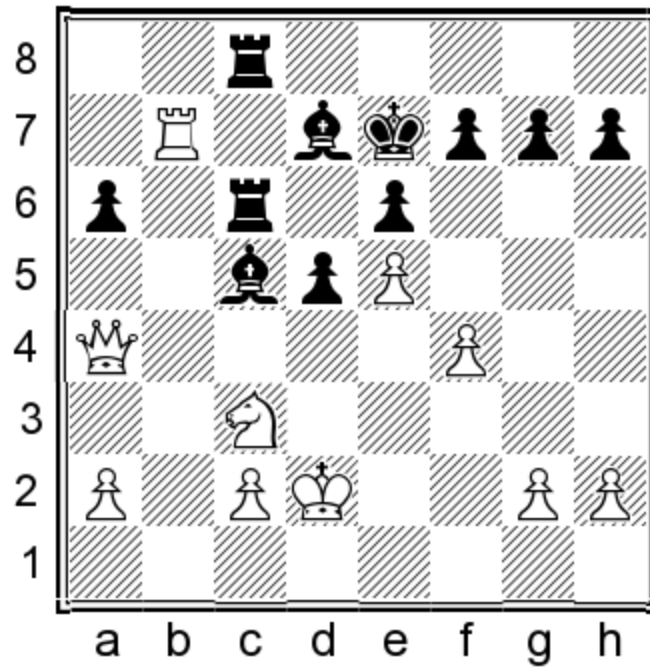
*Position after: 25.Ne2*

Thanks to the loss of tempo caused by the slightly hesitant ...Rd8-c8 maneuver White is in time to consolidate their army. Black's counterplay is over and from now on it boils down to White's technical abilities. 25...Kf8 26.Rb7 Be8 27.g4±

### **24.Rb7!**

The last important move. Compared to the 23...Rd8 variation, Black's d7-bishop is hanging and once again White manages to coordinate their forces and move on to the technical stage.

24.Ne2?? would be a blunder losing on the spot to 24...Rb6!-+.

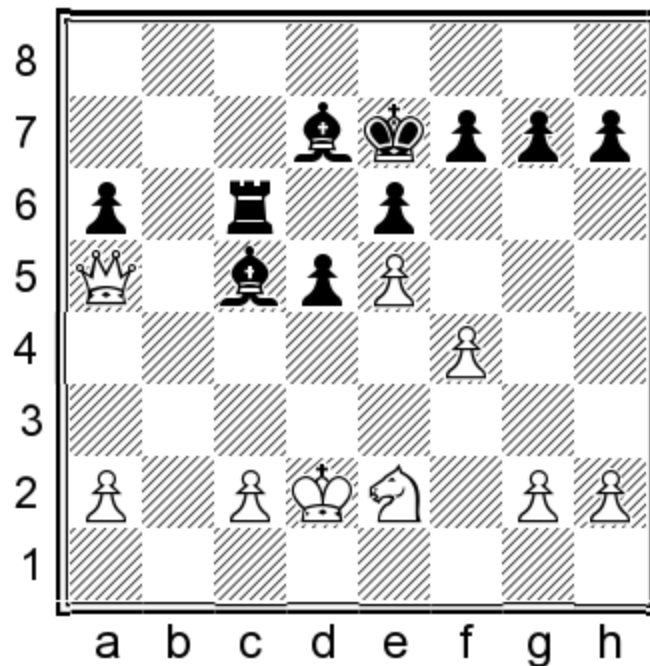


*Position after: 24.Rb7!*

**24...R8c7**

24...Ke8 25.Ne2!±, intending c3, also gives White a pleasant game.

**25.Rxc7 Rxc7 26.Qa5 Rc6 27.Ne2±**

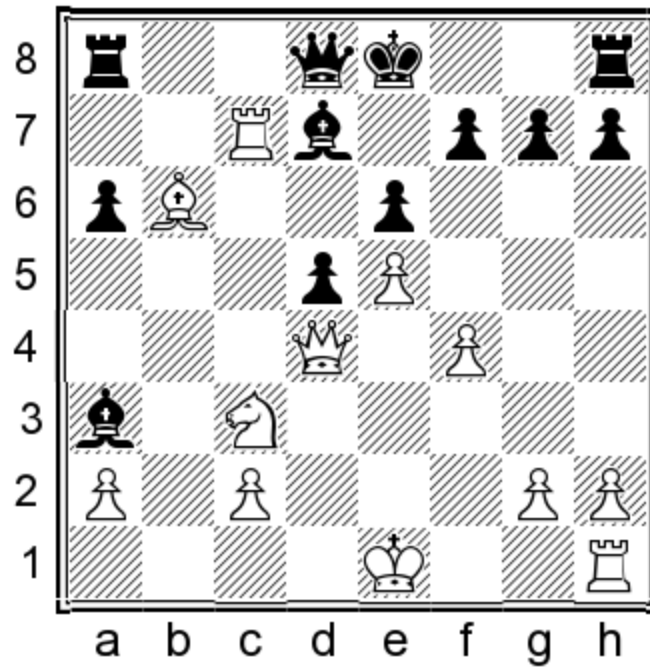


*Position after: 27.Ne2±*

Here Black can only stay put and hope for the best, while White will gradually improve their position with moves like c3, Ne2-d4, and/or even g2-g4, squeezing the defender on both wings.

**e) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! Ba3! & 20...--**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3 11.Bb5 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7 15.Rxb7 Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! Ba3!**



*Position after: 18...Ba3!*

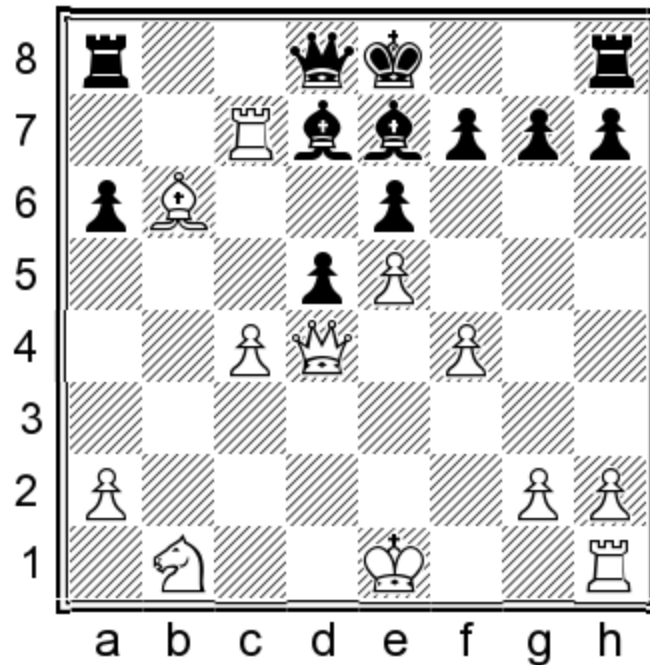
Black has to try to get their king away from the center as soon as possible. While this is the most critical line of the whole system, opening theory seemed to establish a couple of years ago that White already has a slight advantage.

## 19.Nb1!

Quite a paradoxical retreat – to make progress one sometimes needs to take a step back first! Given that the f4-f5 advance is not so effective under the current circumstances, though it is still a perfectly logical one, White is getting ready to push c2-c4 with tempo.

It would be nice if we could launch an attack with 19.f5, since after Black's castling the f-pawn would create a lot of problems for them. Black has a concrete way to solve their problems here though. 19...Rc8! 20.Rc6 Qe7 21.Rxc8+ Bxc8 22.0-0 Qb4!=, entering a roughly balanced endgame.

**19...Be7 20.c4**



*Position after: 20.c4*

The whole knight retreat variation has already been played numerous times and is a reputable theoretical line.

We've come to one of the final crossroads. While objectively the defender should be able to hold the draw after all the theoretical discussion, not many Black players dare to try. In reality, the draw still has to be fought for from a worse, pawn-down endgame.

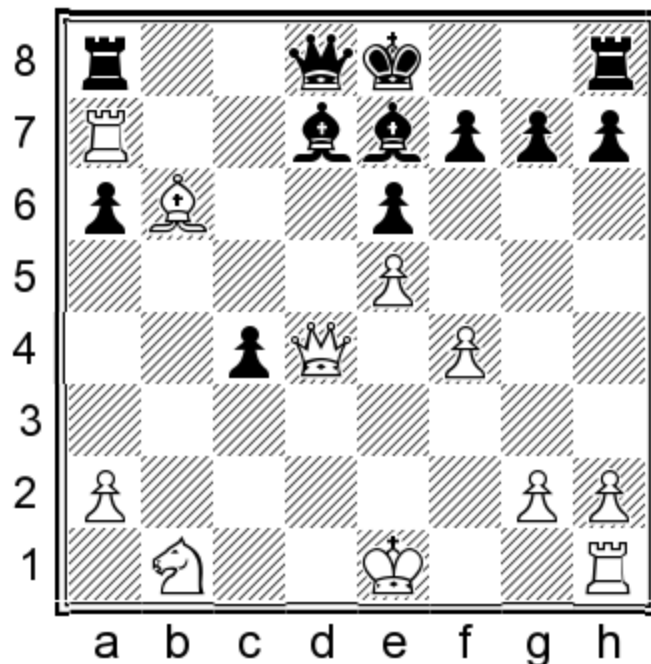
**20...0-0!?**

is the first serious path we will investigate. It was played in a couple of correspondence games and White has to demonstrate some knowledge in order to secure an edge.

**A)** 20...Bb4+? 21.Kf2± is pointless since White does not really mind getting ready to develop the h1-rook, and the

b4-bishop is now under the threat of both cxd5 and c4-c5. Note that 21...dxc4 22.Rxc4!+-, hitting two black pieces at once, is another downside of the bishop check.

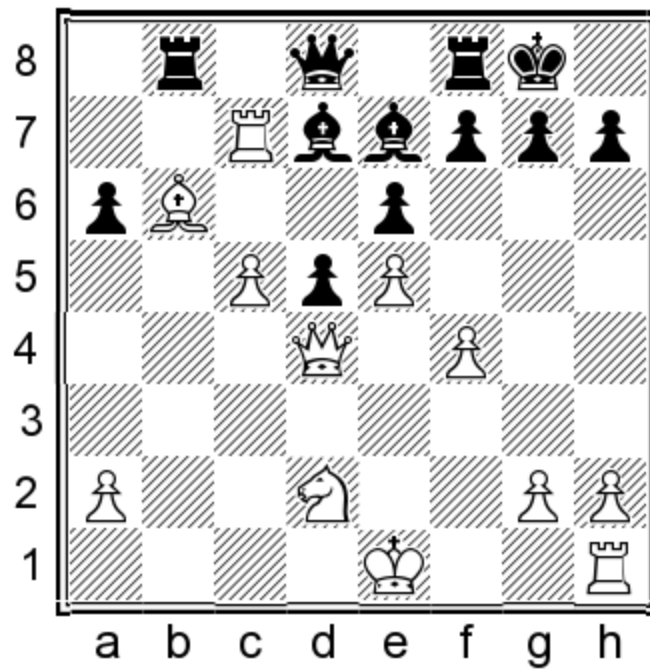
**B)** 20...dxc4? fails to spot a fine tactical nuance 21.Ra7!



*Position after: 21.Ra7!*

21...Qc8 [21...Bb4+ loses material in a similar fashion. 22.Ke2 Qc8 23.Qxd7+! Qxd7 24.Rxa8+ Ke7 25.Ra7+-] 22.Qxd7+! Qxd7 23.Rxa8+ Bd8 24.Rxd8++-, leaving White with an extra piece.

**C)** A cleverer version of the queen sacrifice is 20...Rb8 and this time we should not accept it. 21.Nd2 [21.0-0 dxc4 22.Rb7 Rxb7 23.Bxd8 Bxd8© gives Black quite good compensation for the queen.] 21...0-0 22.c5!

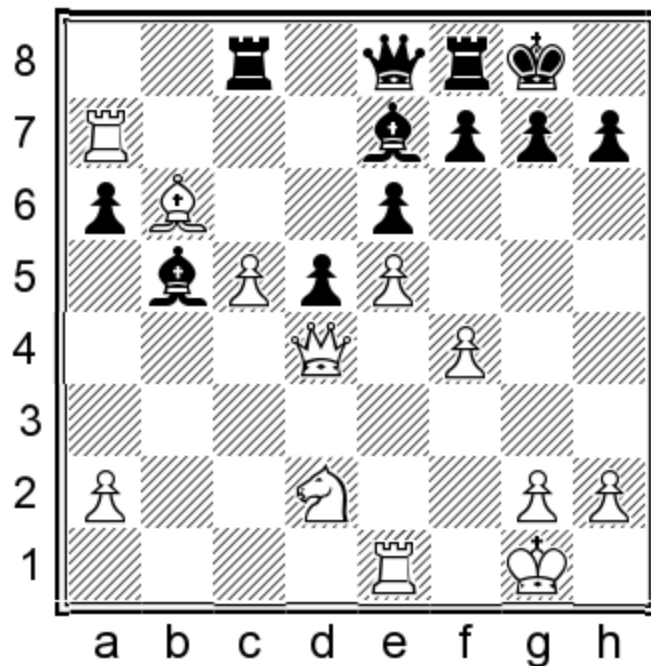


*Position after: 22.c5!*

Black gets into an uncomfortable bind and it is unclear how they should untangle their passive pieces.

**C1)** 22...f6 would be the most obvious try but White remains in firm control after 23.0-0 fxe5 24.Qxe5 Qe8 [24...Rc8?? 25.c6!+-] 25.Nf3<sup>2</sup>.

**C2)** 22...Rc8 23.Ra7 Qe8 24.0-0 Bb5 fails to change much. White's pieces are still well placed and after



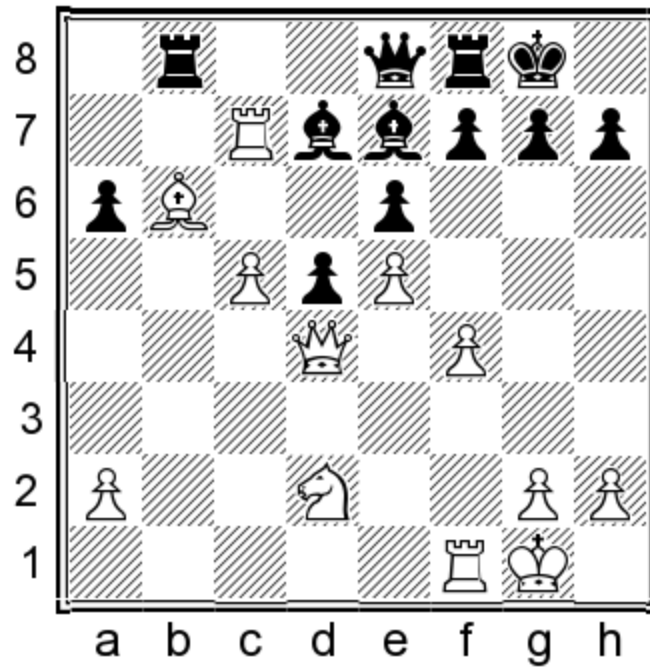
25.Re1!?,

*Position after: 25.Re1!?*

aiming to discourage ...f6, it is unclear what Black has achieved in comparison with the 22...f6 line. 25...Ra8 [25...f6 26.Nf3<sup>2</sup> gives Black a difficult choice - if they open up the e-file, the e6-pawn will most likely fall, whereas if they keep the center closed, they have no hope of active play.] 26.Rxa8 Qxa8 27.Bc7!<sup>±</sup> White will play Bd6 next, highlighting their dark-squared dominance.

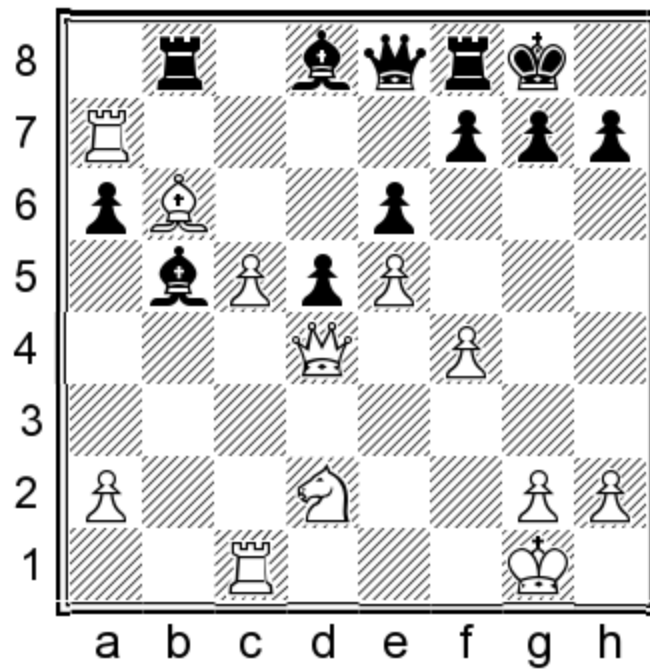
**C3)** 22...Qe8 23.0-0





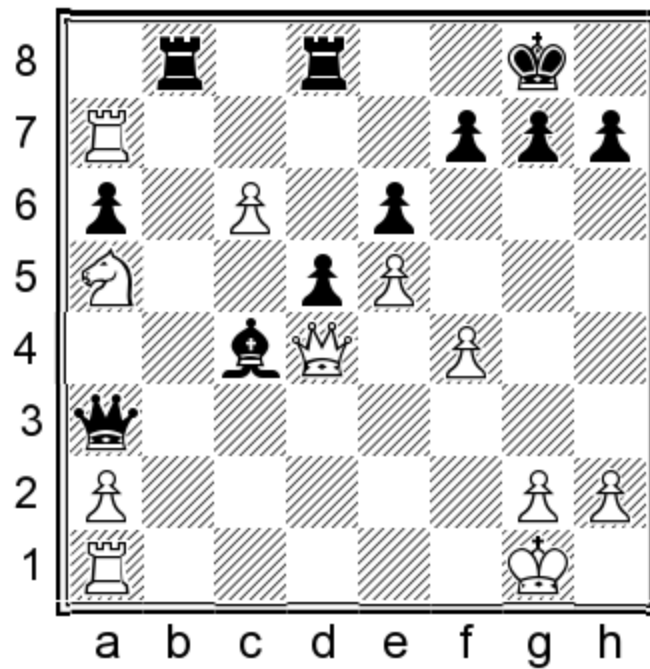
*Position after: 23.0-0*

23...Bd8 is a final try to disrupt White's setup which, unfortunately for Black, falls short of equality as well. [23...Bb5 24.Rc1! Bd8 25.Ra7 transposes below.] 24.Ra7 Bb5 25.Rc1!



*Position after: 25.Rc1!*

White's rook will come in handy on c1, supporting White's passed pawn. 25...Qc6 26.Bxd8 Rfxd8 27.Nb3 Play becomes nice and easy for White. They will simply try to push their passer as far as possible. An example continuation might be 27...Bc4 28.Na5 Qa4 29.c6! The a5-knight is taboo thanks to the c-pawn fork! 29...Qa3 30.Ra1!

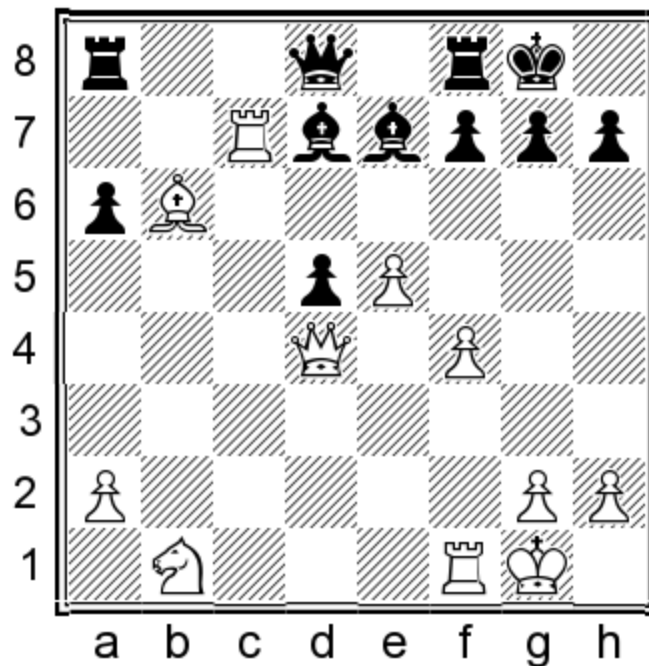


*Position after: 30.Ra1!*

Paradoxically this is the only (though more than sufficiently good) square where the rook is safe from any attack, be it from Black's bishop or queen (from a5).

30...Rbc8 31.c7 Re8 32.Nxc4±

**21.cxd5 exd5 22.0-0**



*Position after: 22.0-0*

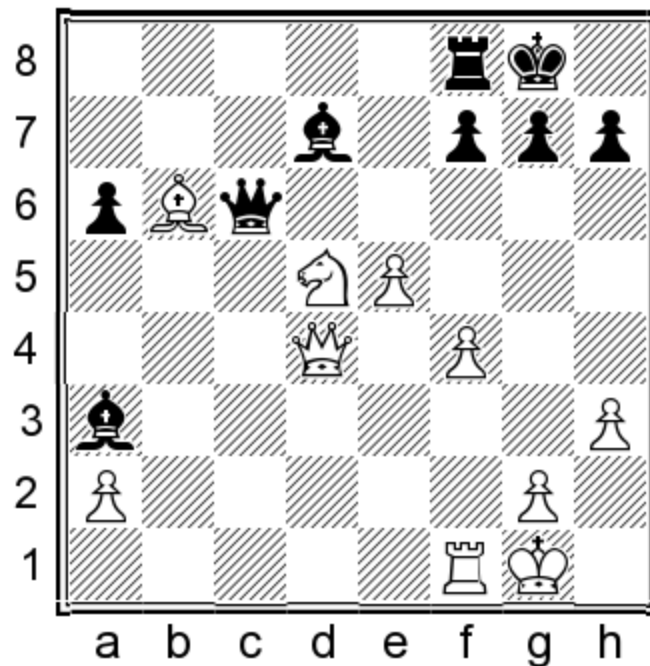
## **22...Rc8**

22...Qe8 is awkward and White has good reason to be happy after 23.Nc3 Bd8 24.Nxd5! Bb5 25.Rd1<sup>2</sup> when, after the dust settles, they will be playing for two results with an extra pawn.

## **23.Rxc8 Qxc8 24.Nc3 Qc6 25.Nxd5 Ba3**

White's pieces are quite shaky here and it is not obvious how to stabilize things for them, while Black simply wants to disrupt White's control even further with a combination of ...Be6 and ...Rb8. Therefore I'd like you to pay extra attention to the following.

## **26.h3!**

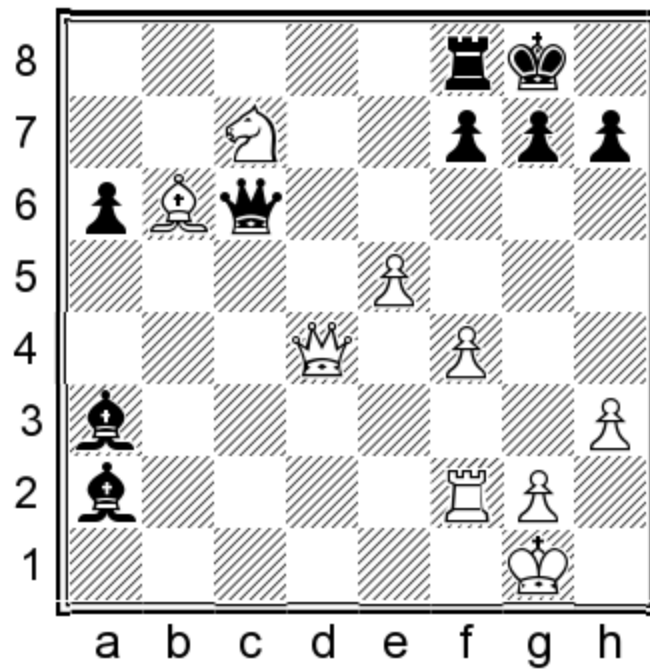


*Position after: 26.h3!*

Quite a nice idea – securing the white king, and hence giving the rook much more freedom of movement.

### **26...Rb8**

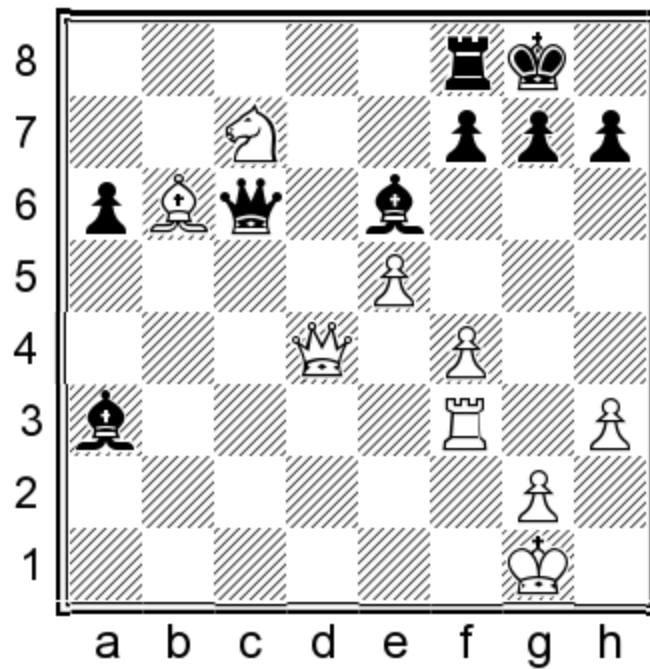
26...Be6 27.Nc7 Bxa2 puts the black bishop pair into an embarrassing situation at the edge of the board, and White can make use of it with the precise prod 28.Rf2!. White is getting ready to attack the a3-bishop as well with Rf3, however it is important to push the a2-bishop back first. [It would be too soon for 28.Rf3?! as Black manages to defend everything with 28...Be7 29.Rc3 Qb7=.]



*Position after: 28.Rf2!*

**A)** 28...Bb1 loses control over the d5-square, and thus White continues 29.Rf3! and now Black has nothing better than 29...Rb8 [29...Be7 30.Nd5!± shows why Black should keep control over d5.] 30.Nxa6 Qxb6 31.Qxb6 Rxb6 32.Rxa3<sup>2</sup>. Arguably Black can make a draw with enough patience and sweat, but it is clear that there is some suffering still to come.

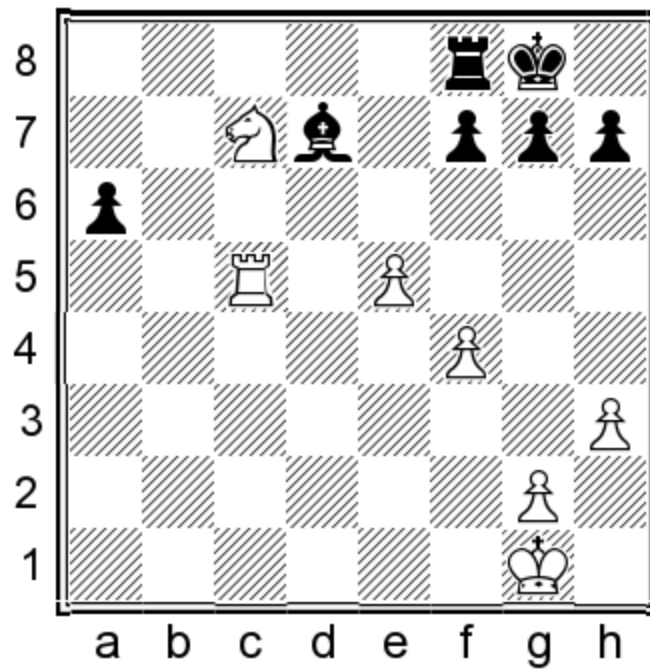
**B)** 28...Be6 29.Rf3!



*Position after: 29.Rf3!*

Once again, after the light-squared bishop has moved, its dark-squared compatriot's options have become much more limited.

**B1)** 29...Be7 30.Rc3 Qd7 [30...Qb7 31.Nxe6! shows the key difference compared to the 28.Rf3 line. 31...fxe6 32.Rc7+-] 31.Qxd7 Bxd7 32.Bc5! Bxc5+ 33.Rxc5<sup>2</sup> will lead to another 4 vs 3 endgame which is a draw for a computer but a great headache from a practical point of view.



*Position after: 33.Rxc5<sup>2</sup>*

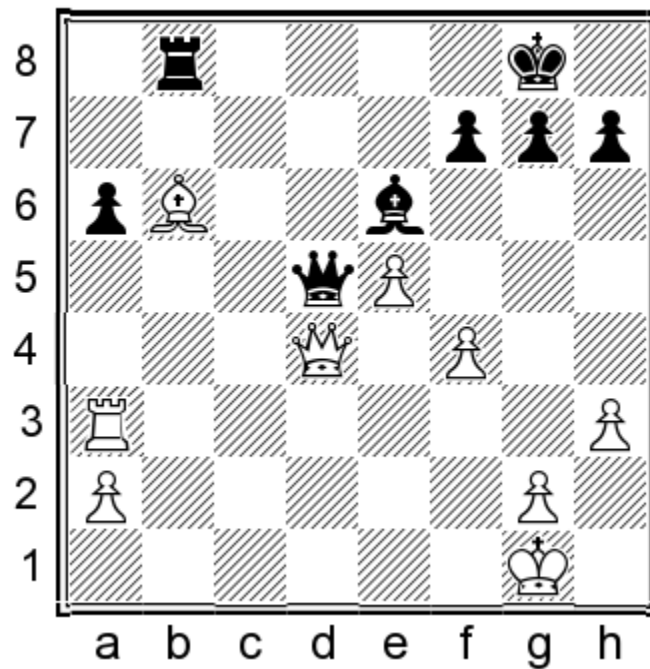
**B2)** 29...Rb8 30.Nxa6 Qxb6 31.Qxb6 Rxb6 32.Rxa3<sup>2</sup>

**27.Rf3! Be6**

After 27...Bf8 28.Rc3!<sup>±</sup>, White is in complete control.

**28.Rc3 Qxd5 29.Rxa3<sup>2</sup>**



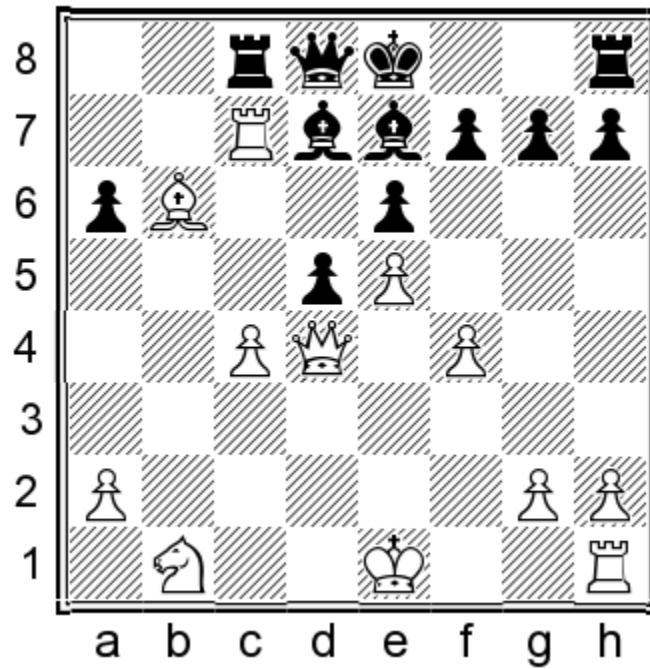


*Position after: 29.Rxa3<sup>2</sup>*

This time we have reached an endgame where the opposite-colored bishop presence should be considered an even greater drawing factor. Nevertheless, an extra pawn is an extra pawn, and there is no doubt that Black players will dislike defending this position.

**f) 15...Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! Ba3! & 20...Rc8**

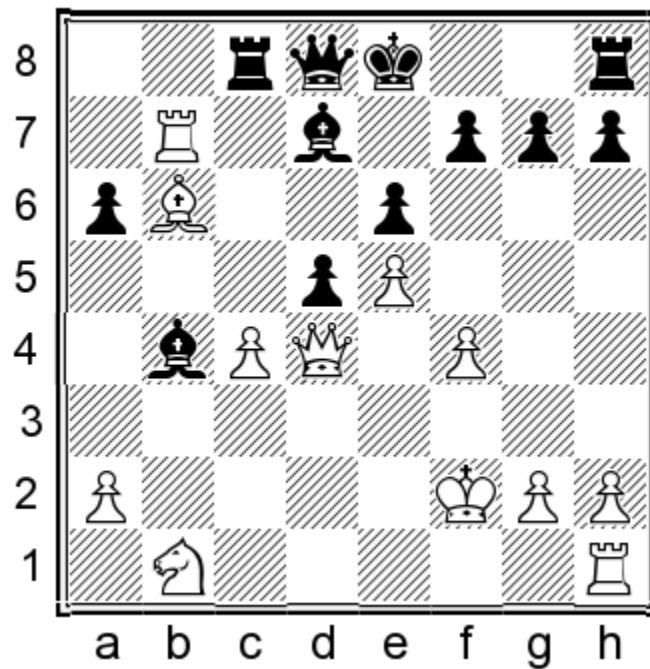
**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6  
7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Qb6 9.Qd2 Qxb2 10.Rb1 Qa3  
11.Bb5 Nxd4 12.Bxd4 a6 13.Bxd7+ Bxd7 14.Rb3 Qe7  
15.Rxb7 Qd8 16.Bb6! Qc8 17.Rc7 Qd8 18.Qd4! Ba3!  
19.Nb1! Be7 20.c4 Rc8**



*Position after: 20...Rc8*

This time Black does not have to give up their queen, and although they are doing comparably better than before, their play should still be insufficient for full equality.

**21.Rb7 Bb4+ 22.Kf2!**

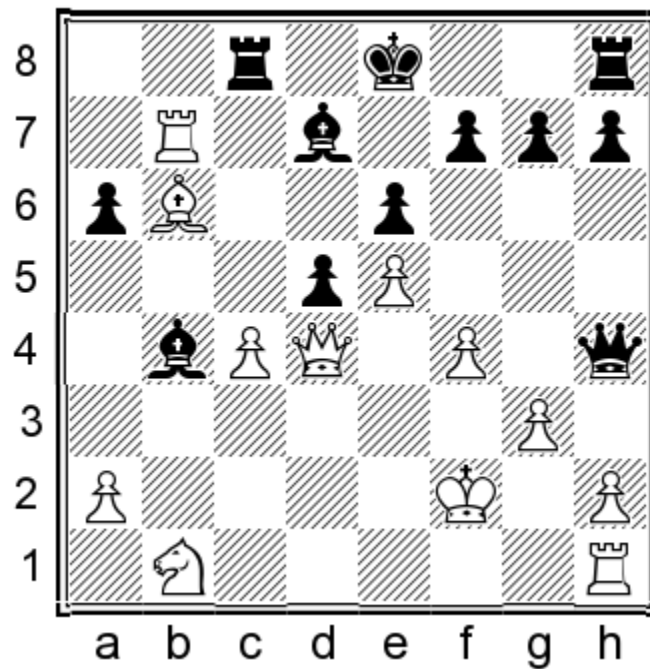


*Position after: 22.Kf2!*

It would be nice to refrain from the following tactical sequence, but on e2 White's king could be subject to checks from g4.

**22...Qxb6!**

**A)** Dragging the queen away from the main battlefield with 22...Qh4+ 23.g3

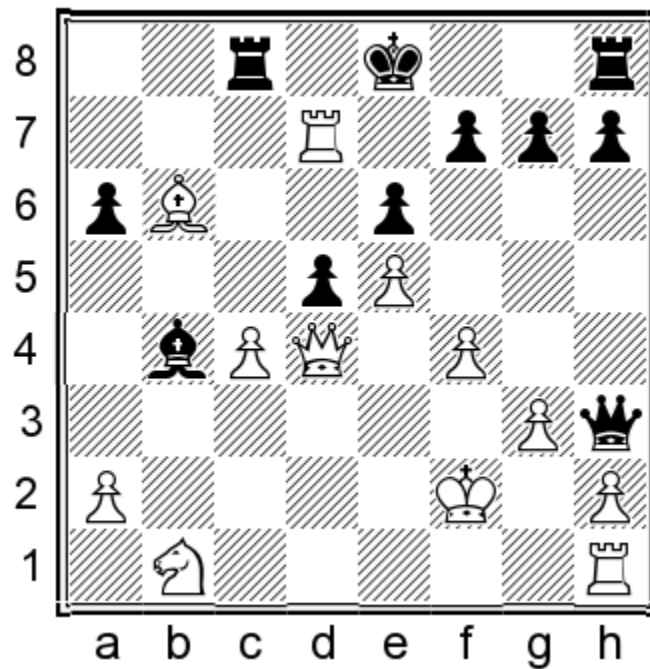


*Position after: 23.g3*

**A1)** 23...Qh5 24.Rxd7 Kxd7 25.c5!± is a much worse version of the ...Qg4 line since Black does not have any counterplay with ...h5-h4 at their disposal.

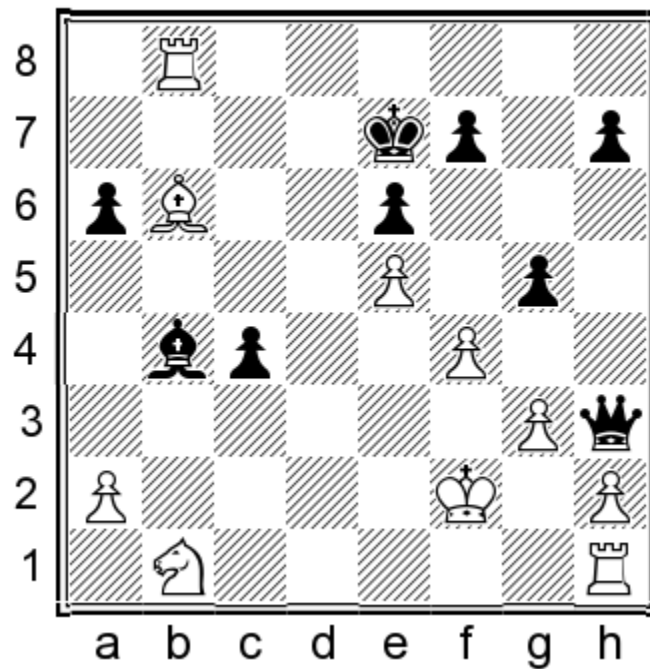
**A2)** 23...Qe7 24.Rc1, threatening to trap the bishop with c4-c5 again, leaves Black with nothing better than 24...Bc5 25.Bxc5 Qxc5 26.Qxc5 Rxc5 27.Nd2±, reaching an improved version of the 22...Qe7 line.

**A3)** Finally 23...Qh3 is an important try as well as White is forced to give up their queen after 24.Rxd7



*Position after: 24.Rxd7*

24...Rxc4 [24...Kxd7 25.c5 a5 26.a3 h5 27.axb4 h4 28.g4!+- is a simple yet extremely effective way of stopping Black's counterplay on the kingside, leaving White with a decisive advantage on the other wing.]  
 25.Qxc4 dxc4 26.Rd8+ Ke7 27.Rxh8 Black's queen is well placed on h3 in this scenario as it is not easy for White to bring the h1-rook into the attack. In the end the rooks should prevail, although quite a lot of inspirational tactics will be called for. 27...g5 28.Rb8!



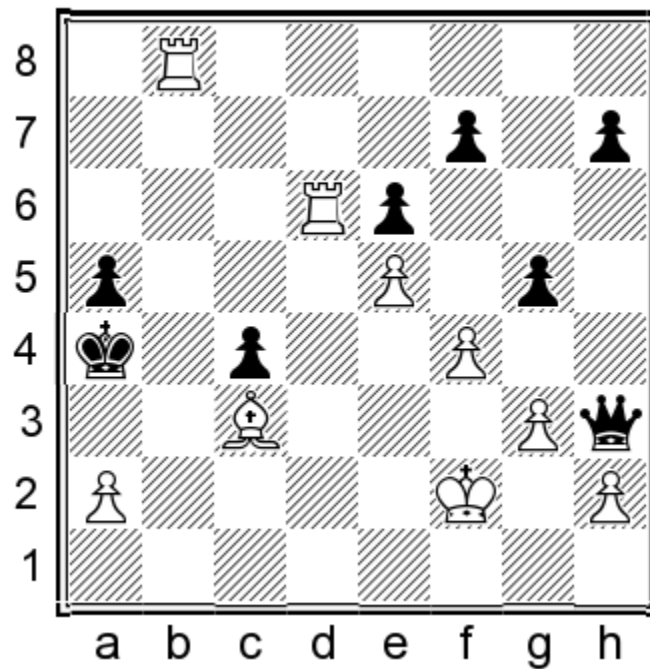
*Position after: 28.Rb8!*

Getting ready for Bd8+. 28...a5 [Black's queen is unable to do much on its own so 28...gxf4 29.Bd8+ Kd7 30.Rd1+ Kc6 31.Rxb4+- will simply be winning for the first player after they successfully evacuate their king to c1.]

29.Nc3!! Luring the bishop away from the key d6-square. There is little choice for Black but to take the plunge.

29...Bxc3 30.Bd8+ Kd7 31.Rd1+ Kc6 32.Rd6+ Kc5

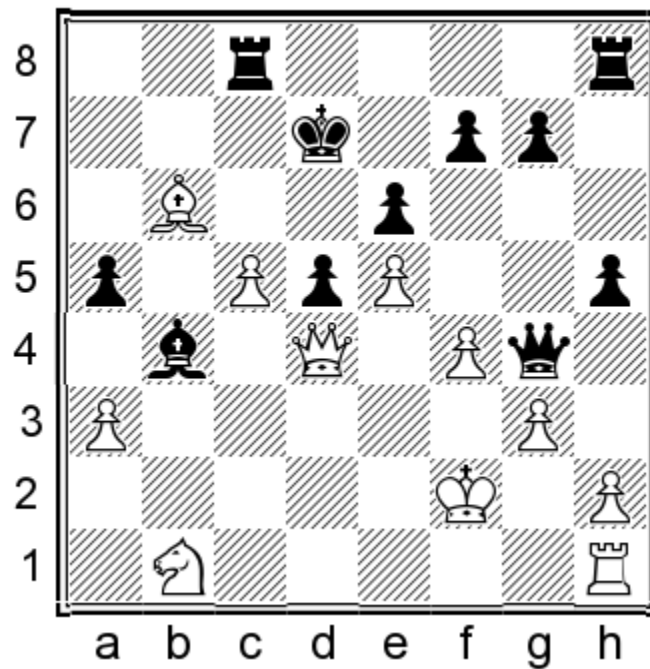
33.Bb6+ Kb5 34.Bd4+ Ka4 35.Bxc3



*Position after: 35.Bxc3*

The whole sequence was forced, and now we just need to confirm White's king will be able to hide, which we can. For example 35...Qxh2+ 36.Ke1 Qxg3+ 37.Kd2 Qxf4+ 38.Kc2 Qf5+ 39.Kb2 Qf2+ 40.Rd2+- and the checks are finally over. White still needs to convert their unusual material advantage but with the king stuck in various mating nets on a4 it should not be a big deal.

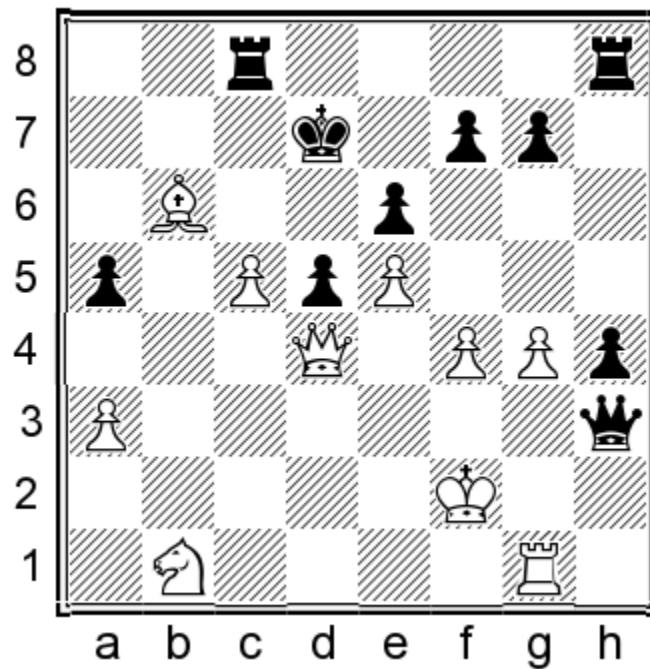
**A4)** 23...Qg4 promises nothing good for Black's future. 24.Rxd7! This can hardly be considered a sacrifice as White will immediately regain the material by trapping the b4-bishop. Actually, they will even turn the material scales in their favor. 24...Kxd7 25.c5 a5 26.a3 h5



*Position after: 26...h5*

For a change, ...h4 is a serious threat which needs to be parried. 27.h3! Be1+ The only chance, otherwise Black's counterattack comes to a halt. 28.Rxe1 Qxh3 The threat of ...h4 is imminent and unless White takes some precautions, things might get out of hand very fast. 29.Rg1! h4 30.g4 A familiar picture.

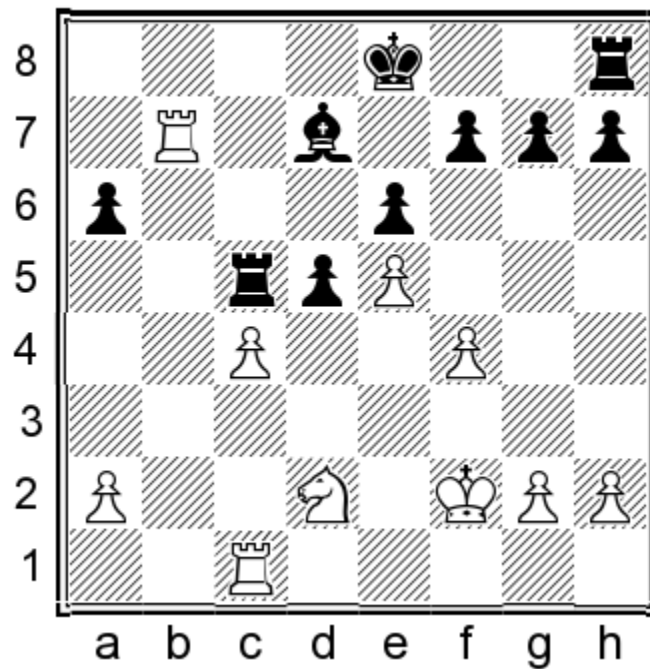




*Position after: 30.g4*

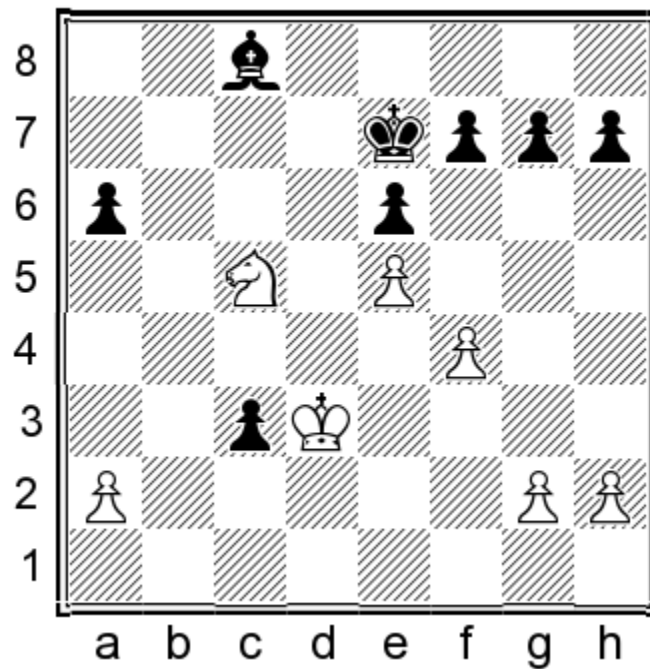
Black's own queen becomes an obstacle in the way of their passer. White has everything under control after 30...Qb3 31.Qe3 both in the possible endgame, or after, say 31...Qc2+ 32.Nd2 h3 33.Kg3 h2 34.Rh1±.

**B)** 22...Qe7 23.Rc1! renews the threat of c4-c5, and the endgame after 23...Bc5 24.Bxc5 Qxc5 25.Qxc5 Rxc5 26.Nd2



*Position after: 26.Nd2*

does not look good for Black at all, e.g. 26...Ke7 27.Nb3! Rxc4 28.Rxc4 dxc4 29.Nc5 Rd8 30.Ke3 c3 31.Rc7! [Sidestepping the nasty trap of 31.Kd3? c2! 32.Kxc2 Rc8!=] 31...Rc8 [31...Ke8 32.Nb7±] 32.Rxc8 Bxc8 33.Kd3<sup>2</sup> with great winning chances for White in this typical, advantageous ending.

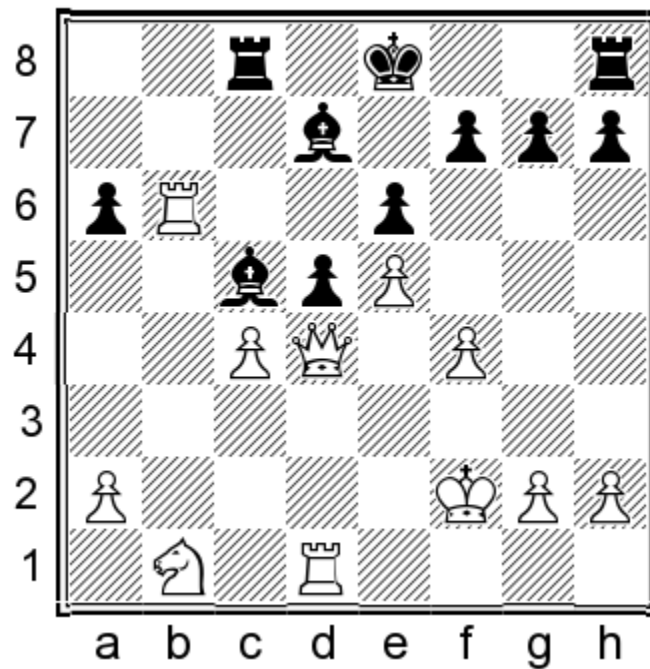


*Position after: 33.Kd3<sup>2</sup>*

### **23.Rxb6 Bc5**

Black is winning their queen back immediately, but that can hardly solve their problem of a continued lack of development, even in the endgame.

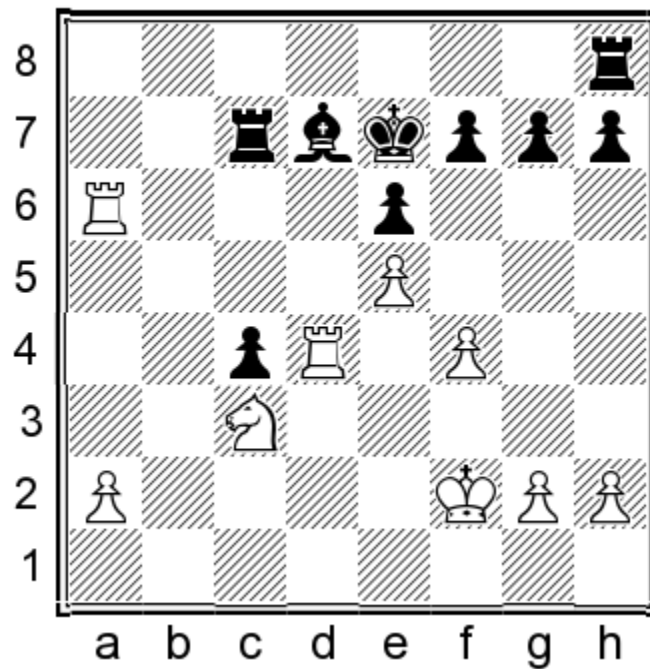
### **24.Rd1**



*Position after: 24.Rd1*

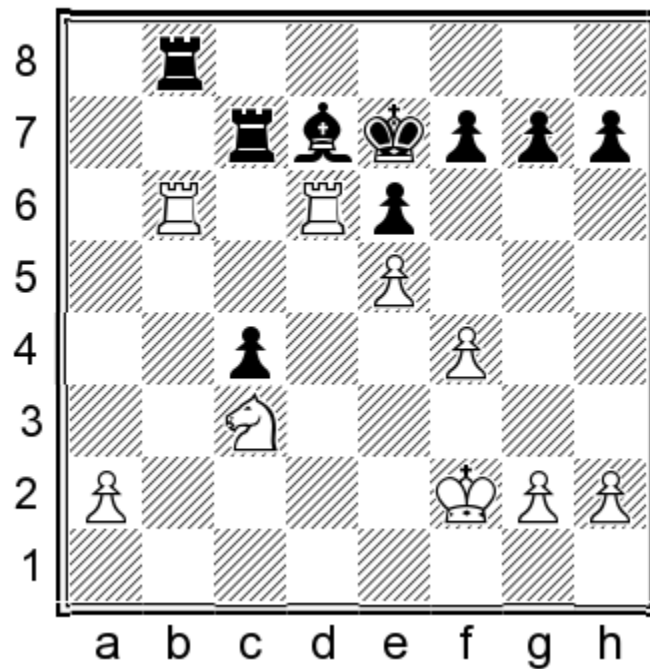
### **24...0-0**

Black is not obliged to rush with 24...Bxd4+ 25.Rxd4 which was played in an important theoretical battle between Kamsky and Shimanov in 2013. 25...dxc4 26.Nc3 Rc7 27.Rxa6 Ke7



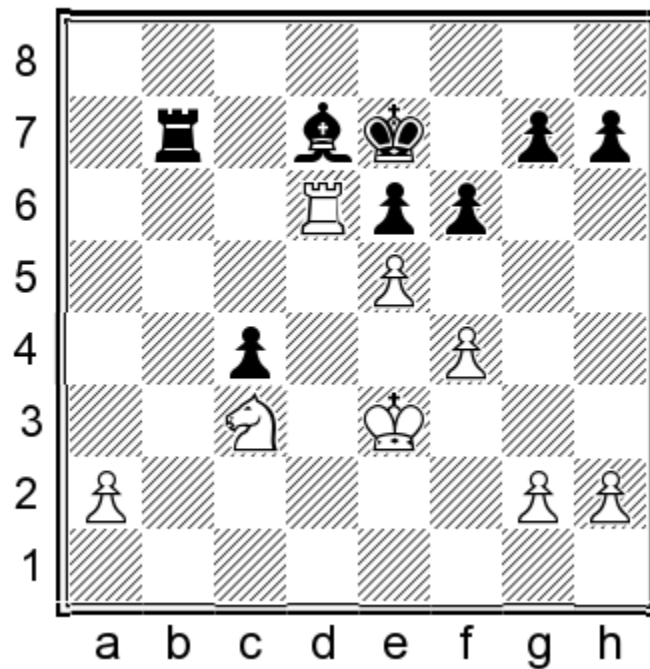
*Position after: 27...Ke7*

White keeps an advantage thanks to their activity and the c4-pawn being chronically weak. Their current task is to limit the possibilities of Black's rooks, and the most precise way to do this is 28.Rdd6!, not giving away any counterplay at all. [28.Rb6 was played in the aforementioned game and although it gave Black some breathing space, Kamsky managed to keep a portion of his initial edge and gradually went on to win after 28...Ra8 29.Ke3 Ra3 30.Kd2<sup>2</sup>.] 28...Rb8 [There will be no relief after 28...f6 29.f5!±.] 29.Rab6!



*Position after: 29.Rab6!*

29...Rcb7 [29...Ra8 30.Ke3 Ra3 31.Kd4<sup>2</sup> is an incomparably better version of Kamsky's game - White's king is much more active on d4 than d2.] 30.Rxb7 Rxb7 31.Ke3 Unless Black finds counterplay quickly, they will slowly suffocate to death. 31...f6 [In an ideal world White would just swap the rooks away and claim a decisive advantage in the minor-piece ending. And so we see there is no point for Black in playing 31...Rb2 32.Rd2.]

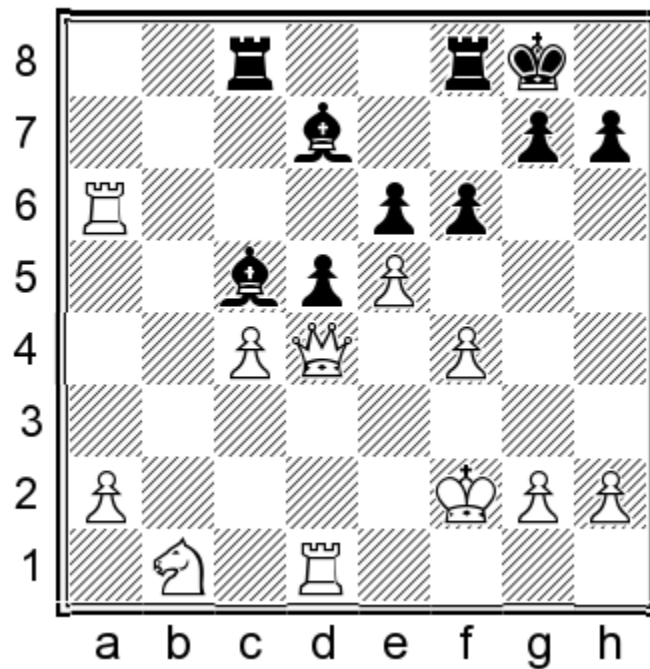


*Position after: 31...f6*

**A)** White should be careful not to let Black undermine their pawn chain with ...g5 straight away, for example with 32.g3 g5, when things get a bit murky as after 33.Ra6 gxf4+ 34.gxf4 fxe5 35.fxe5 Rb2= Black is doing fine due to the hanging h2-pawn.

**B)** 32.h4! h6 33.g3 Here White is okay with letting Black play ...g5 as there will be no weakness on h2 anymore. 33...g5 34.hxg5 hxg5 35.Ra6 gxf4+ 36.gxf4 fxe5 37.fxe5<sup>2</sup> Sooner or later Black will lose the c4-pawn and while White is not winning by force, Black is definitely uncomfortably worse.

**25.Rxa6 f6**

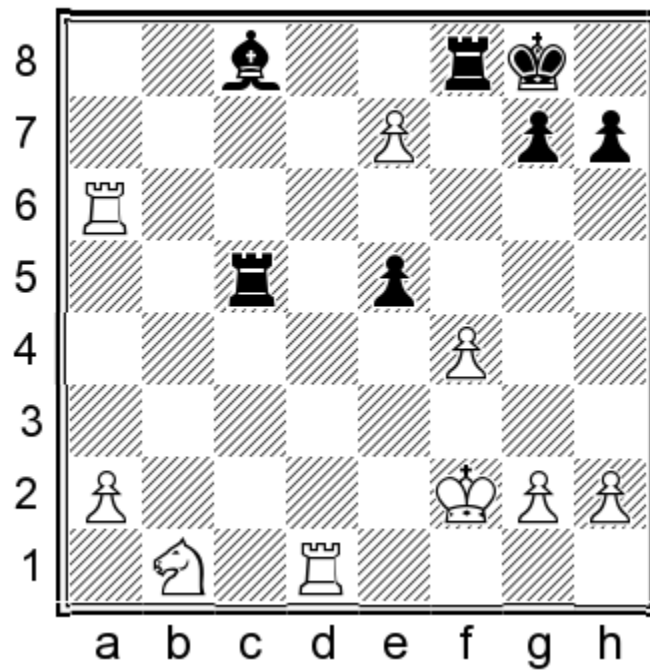


*Position after: 25...f6*

Eventually White is forced to take action because Black is already threatening to win material. Once again, simplifications are inevitable but even if the computer only claims a tiny edge for White, in practical play it is unpleasant for Black to defend the prospectless pawn-down endings that follow.

**26.Qxc5 Rxc5 27.cxd5 fxe5 28.dxe6 Bc8 29.e7**



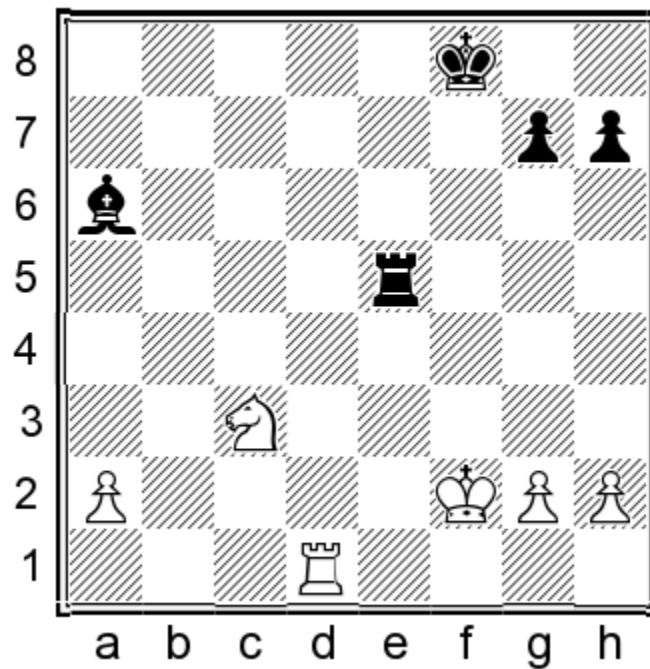


*Position after: 29.e7*

**29...Bxa6**

29...Re8 30.Ra7 Kf7 31.fxe5 Rxe7 32.Rxe7+ Kxe7 33.Rd2<sup>2</sup> is similar.

**30.exf8= Q+ Kxf8 31.fxe5 Rxe5 32.Nc3<sup>2</sup>**



*Position after: 32.Nc3<sup>2</sup>*

With limited material left on the board Black does have some realistic drawing chances. However, there is little doubt that White will try to grind them down, enjoying a comfortable material advantage, for many moves to come.

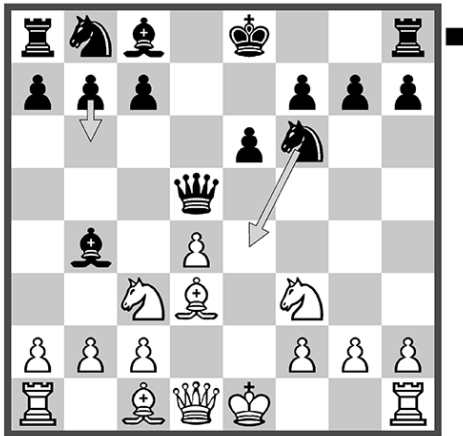
# **Part VI**

## **Anti-Winawer**

# Chapter 18

## The Katalymov Variation

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 Qxd5 5.Nf3 Nf6 6.Bd3**



## Chapter Guide

### Chapter 18 - The Katalymov Variation

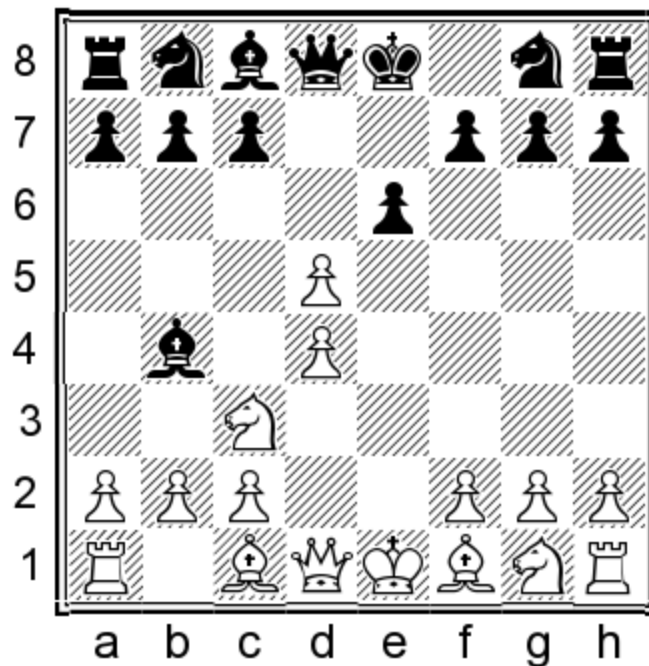
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 Qxd5 5.Nf3 Nf6 6.Bd3

a) 6...Ne4

b) 6...b6

**a) 6...Ne4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5**



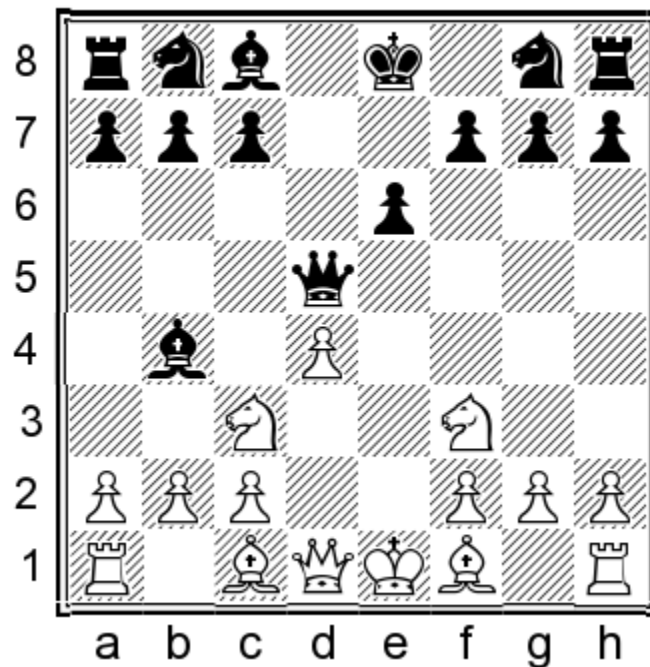
*Position after: 4.exd5*

Once again there are several options to play for White against 3...Bb4, but I decided to go with this simple set-up. Interestingly, I had already played this system against GM Caruana in St. Louis, February 2019, and against GM Rapport in Prague, March 2019.

#### **4...Qxd5**

The so-called Katalymov Variation was featured in one of the early issues of Secrets of Opening Surprises. We have already seen similar positions in the Rubinstein variation (3...dxe4 4.Nxe4 Qd5) where we opted for natural development with 5.Bd3. In fact, you can simplify your workload by playing 3...dxe4 4.Nxe4 Qd5 5.Nc3, transposing into the current variation, as Black does not have much choice but to play 5...Bb4. I prefer not to move backwards in the opening if I can avoid it though.

## 5.Nf3

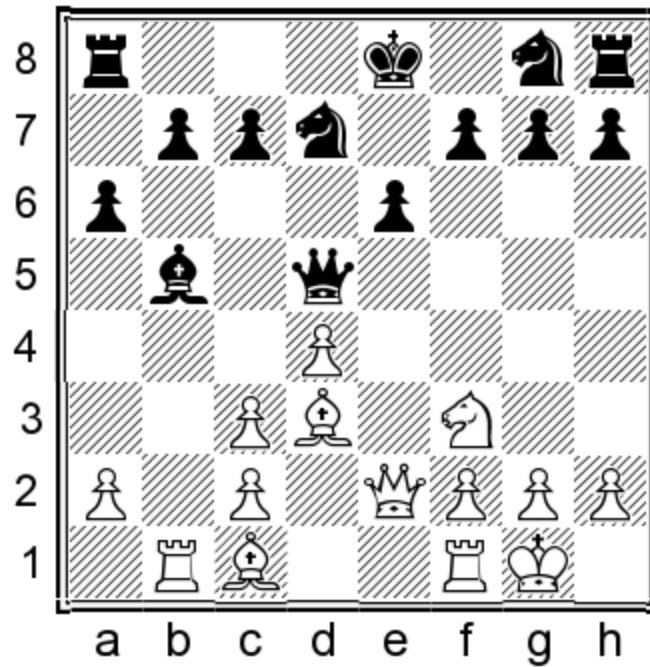


*Position after: 5.Nf3*

Our next moves are Bd3 and 0-0, almost regardless of how our opponent responds. Black will have to cede their bishop pair and capture on c3 at some point, after which White's central pawns will start rolling. Overall Black's whole concept looks very suspicious.

## 5...Nf6

Black should aim to finish their development quickly as 5...Bd7 6.Bd3 Bb5 is a noble but incredibly slow idea. Exchanging the light-squared bishops is generally desirable for Black but it takes way too much time here. 7.0-0 Bxc3 8.bxc3 Nd7 9.Rb1 a6 10.Qe2



*Position after: 10.Qe2*

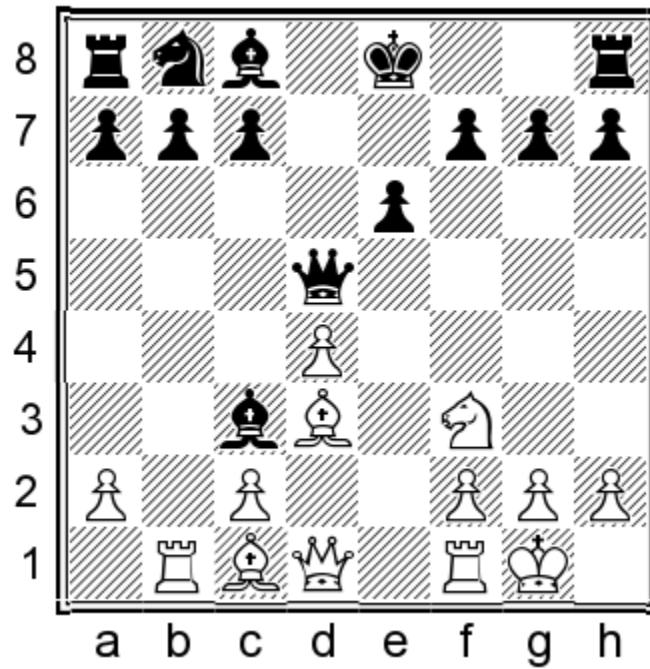
Jeroen Bosch rightly points out that this position is better for White in his SOS article, and I daresay it is actually much better. As c3-c4 is a threat, Black must react.

10...Bxd3 11.cxd3 Ngf6 12.c4 and with the threat of d4-d5 hanging in the air it is hard to imagine that Black can survive.

## **6.Bd3 Ne4**

Going after the c3-pawn with this knight move is extremely dangerous for Black.

## **7.0-0! Nxc3 8.bxc3 Bxc3 9.Rb1**

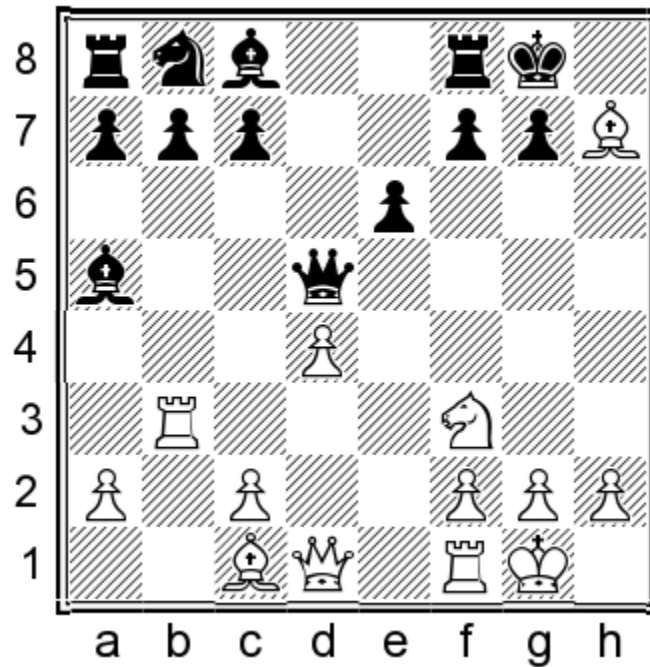


*Position after: 9.Rb1*

**9...Nc6**

**A)** Black has to try to develop as they cannot evacuate their king successfully. 9...0-0? 10.Rb3 Ba5 11.Bxh7+!



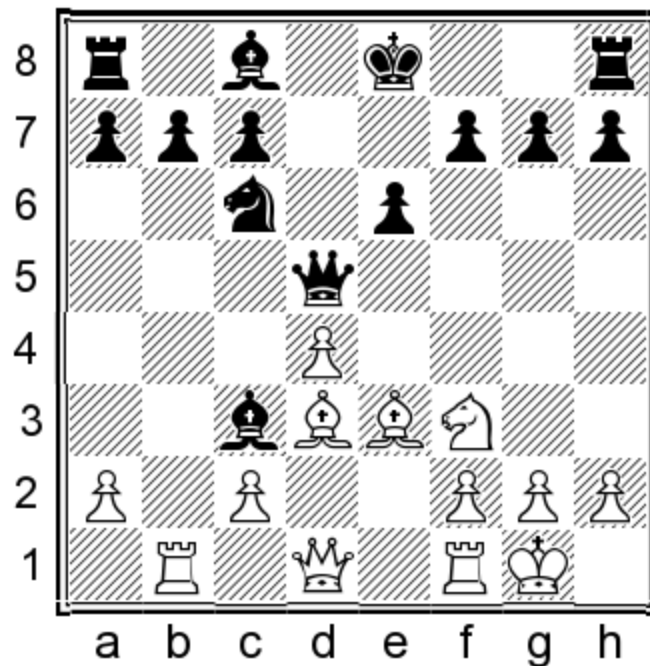


*Position after: 11.Bxh7+!*

is a typical killer. Note the importance of the rook lift to b3 as it is able to join the attack after 11...Kxh7 12.Ng5+ Kg8 13.Qh5 Qf5 14.Rh3!+-, with decisive threats to the black king.

**B)** Of course not 9...Bxd4? 10.Nxd4 Qxd4 as White will uncork 11.Bb5+!+-, winning the black queen.

**10.Be3**



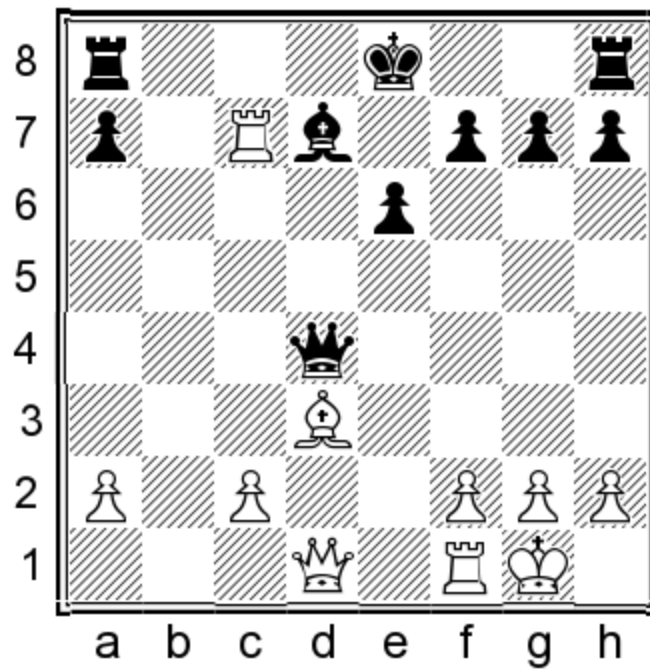
*Position after: 10.Be3*

White is threatening to kick the bishop away with Rb3 and push c2-c4. Therefore, the defender needs to force matters.

**10...Bd7**

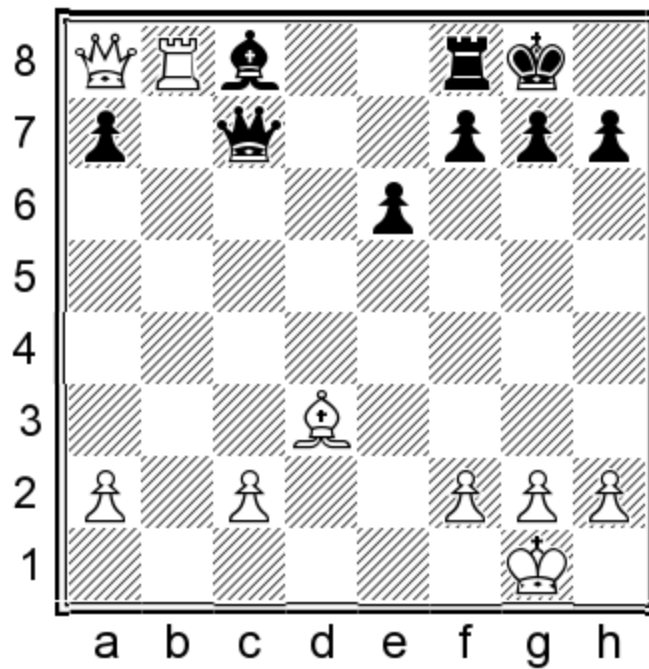
Now the d4-pawn is hanging as there are no discovered attacks with Bb5+. Nevertheless, White will retain pressure despite the exchanges.

**11.Rb5 Qd6 12.Rxb7 Nxd4 13.Nxd4 Bxd4 14.Bxd4 Qxd4 15.Rxc7**



*Position after: 15.Rxc7*

It might seem that Black is somehow able to survive after  
 15...Qb6 16.Qf3 Qxc7 17.Qxa8+ Bc8  
 but White has the very unpleasant maneuver 18.Rb1! 0-0  
 19.Rb8!<sup>2</sup>

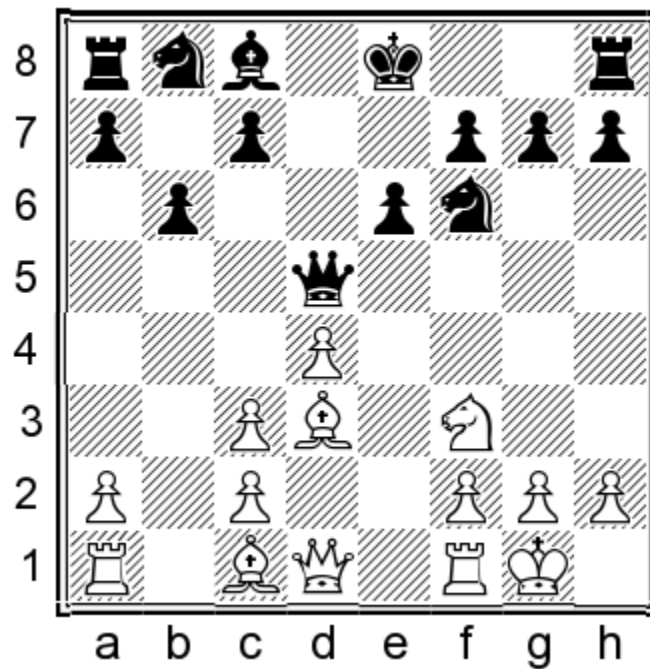


*Position after: 19.Rb8!²*

which keeps a lot of pressure. Even if Black somehow miraculously manages to exchange some of White's annoying pieces, all of the endgames will be unfavorable for them due to White's passed c-pawn.

**b) 6...b6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 Qxd5 5.Nf3 Nf6  
6.Bd3 b6 7.O-O Bxc3 8.bxc3**



*Position after: 8.bxc3*

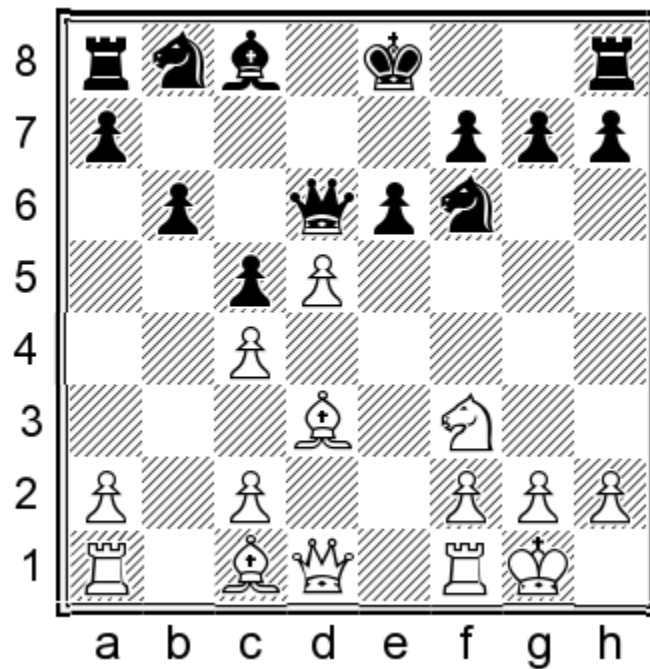
Now White should focus on getting c3-c4 in as soon as possible.

Bosch considers only slow development like Rf1-e1, but somehow omits the possibility of White utilizing their great potential in the center.

### **8...0-0**

Otherwise Black's king runs into a lot of trouble.

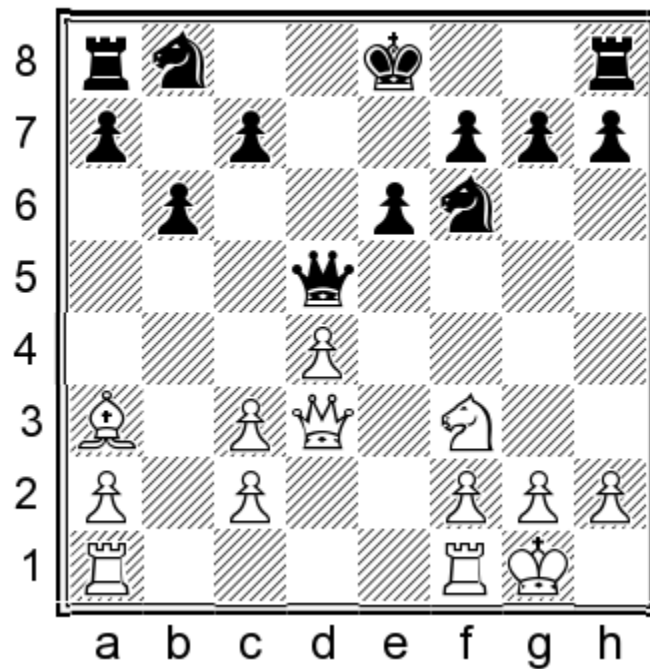
**A) 8...c5 9.c4 Qd6 10.d5!**



*Position after: 10.d5!*

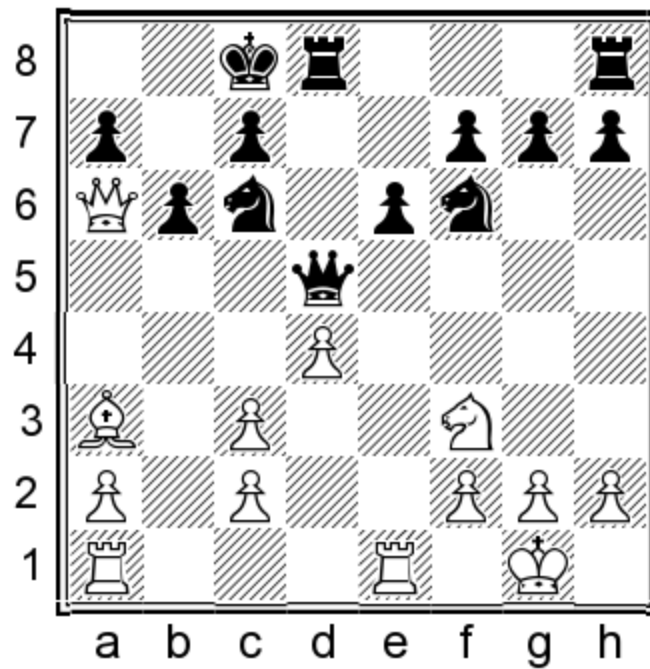
is a model example of how things might go wrong for Black immediately. After 10...exd5 11.cxd5 Qxd5 12.Bb2! White can continue to build pressure with Re1, or Qe2 and Rad1. They also have a concrete threat – the d5-queen could be hanging, as after 12...0-0? 13.Bxf6 gxf6 14.Bxh7+!+-, Her Majesty is dethroned.

**B)** 8...Ba6 9.Bxa6 Nxa6 10.Qd3 Nb8 11.Ba3! is very troublesome for Black too.



*Position after: 11.Ba3!*

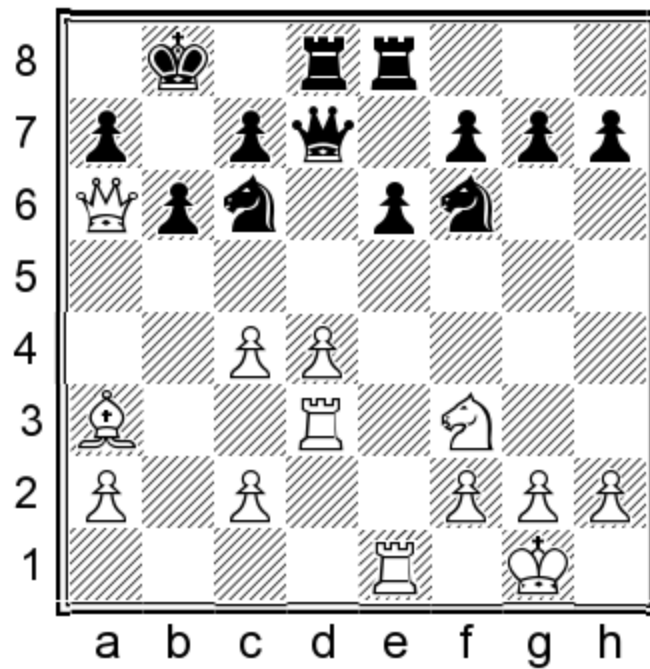
Their king is stuck and c3-c4 is coming soon. 11...Nc6 is the only reasonable move, putting some pressure on d4 and evacuating the king to the other side. However, eventually we will have things our way. 12.Rfe1 The first preparatory step: we deprive Black of the option of ... Qe4. 12...0-0-0 [12...Qa5 13.Qc4! is rather unpleasant] 13.Qa6+!



*Position after: 13.Qa6+!*

The second step: we take the a5-square away from the queen. 13...Kb8 14.Rad1! The importance of this move will become evident soon; the d4-pawn needs to be well protected. 14...Rhe8 15.c4 Qd7 [Thanks to the move Rad1 the d4-pawn is not hanging in the case of 15...Qa5 16.Qxa5 Nxa5, and White can continue with 17.Ne5!±, with a great advantage.] 16.Rd3!±

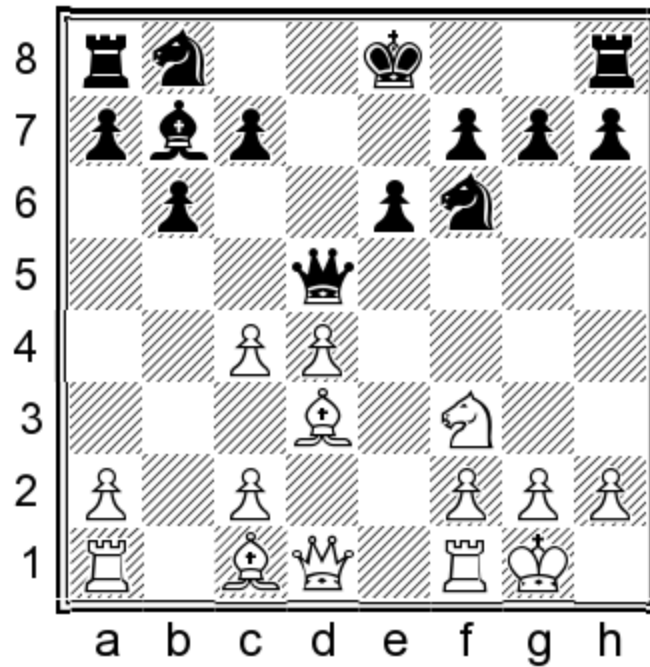




*Position after: 16.Rd3!±*

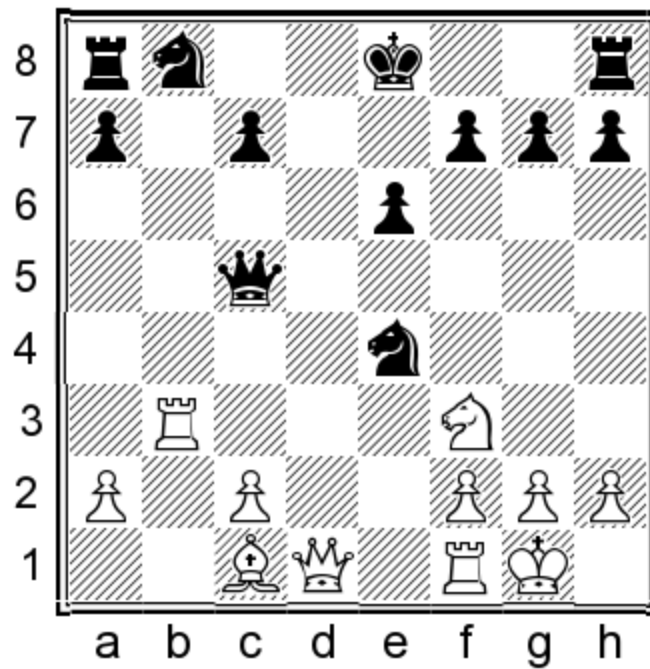
Black's only hope for counterplay was ...e6-e5, utilizing the pin along the d-file. Not only have we taken that possibility away, but we are also planning to continue the attack with c4-c5. You will have all the fun as long as you remember to keep the queens on the board, so do not exchange in case of ... Qc8!

**C) 8...Bb7 9.c4!**



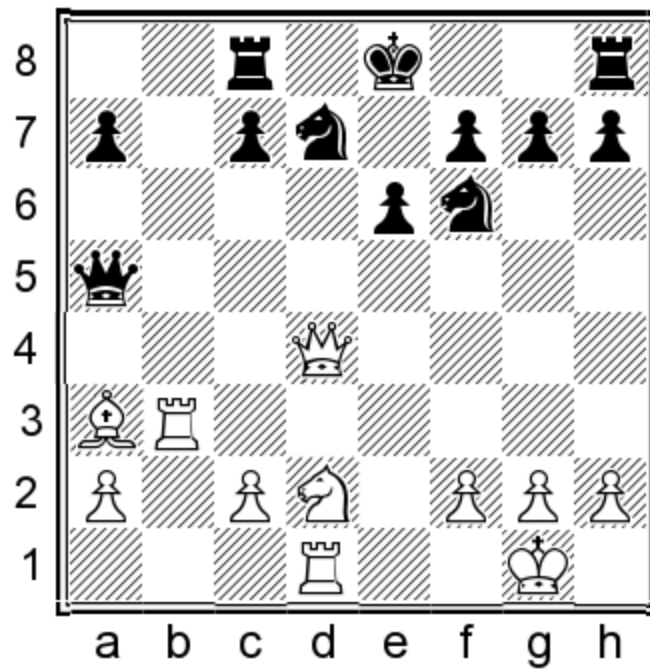
*Position after: 9.c4!*

9...Qd6 Black should prevent Ba3, [Note that after 9...Qh5 10.Be2! Black's queen gets into a lot of hot water, which is why it should remain on the d-file.] but White can open the position with 10.c5! bxc5 11.Rb1 Be4 12.dxc5 Qxc5 13.Bxe4 Nxe4 14.Rb3!



*Position after: 14.Rb3!*

Keeping the attack going. Since White is getting in Ba3, there is no time for Black to castle, e.g. 14...Nd7 15.Ba3 Qa5 16.Qd4 Nef6 17.Rd1 Rc8. The only idea for Black is to play ...c5, block the a3-bishop and finally castle, and therefore we should react with 18.Nd2!

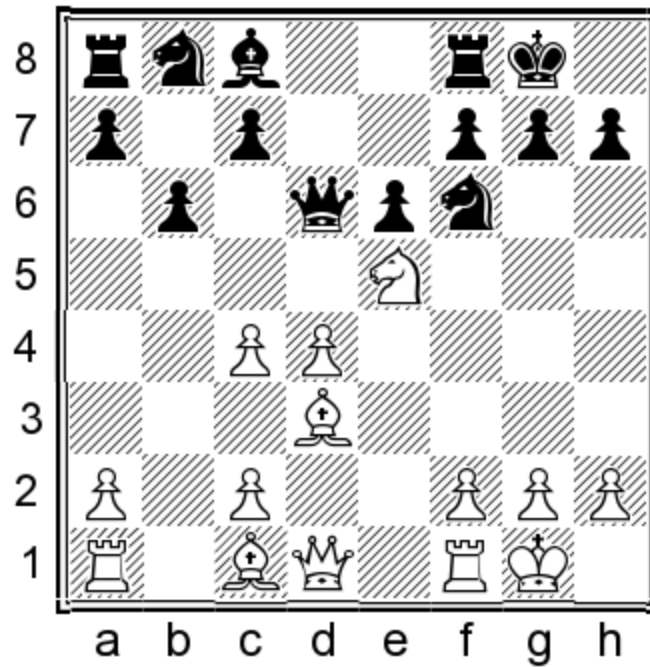


*Position after: 18.Nd2!*

with the following point: 18...c5 19.Qd6 Qc7 20.Nc4!± and Black's problems continue as trading queens on d6 would cost them an exchange.

## 9.c4 Qd6

This position is the toughest nut to crack as Black's king is relatively safe. We should try to make most of Black's awkward queen maneuvers by playing 10.Ne5!

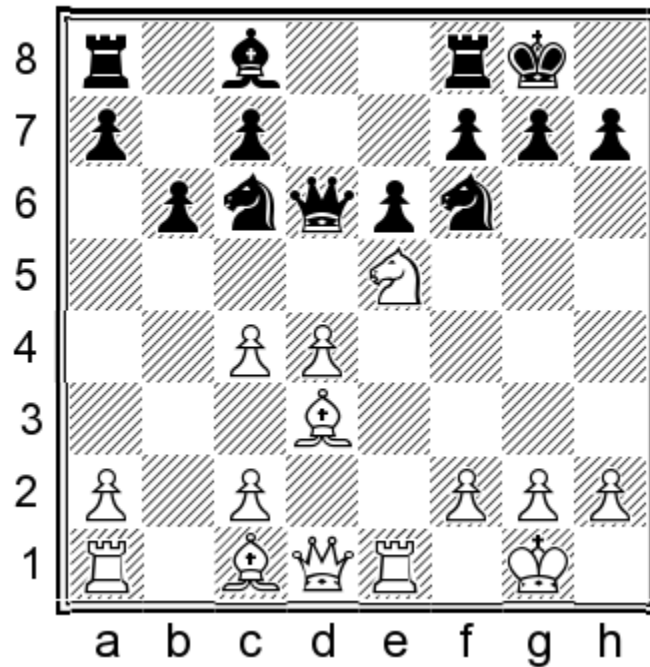


*Position after: 10.Ne5!*

aiming for Bf4, targeting the queen on d6. You should pay attention to move orders here as a bit of precision is needed to stabilize White's advantage.

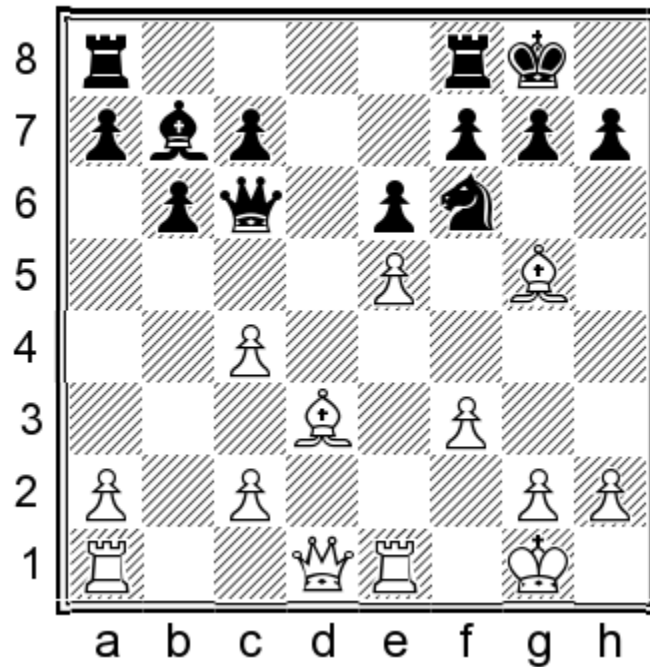
### **10...Nbd7**

**A)** 10...Nc6 puts pressure on both the e5 and d4-squares. We will protect our strong centralized knight by playing 11.Re1!.



*Position after: 11.Re1!*

**A1)** 11...Bb7 The fact that Black's knight is on c6 instead of d7 justifies 12.Bg5!, threatening to ruin Black's pawn structure. After the tactical sequence 12...Nxe5 13.dxe5 Qc6 14.f3

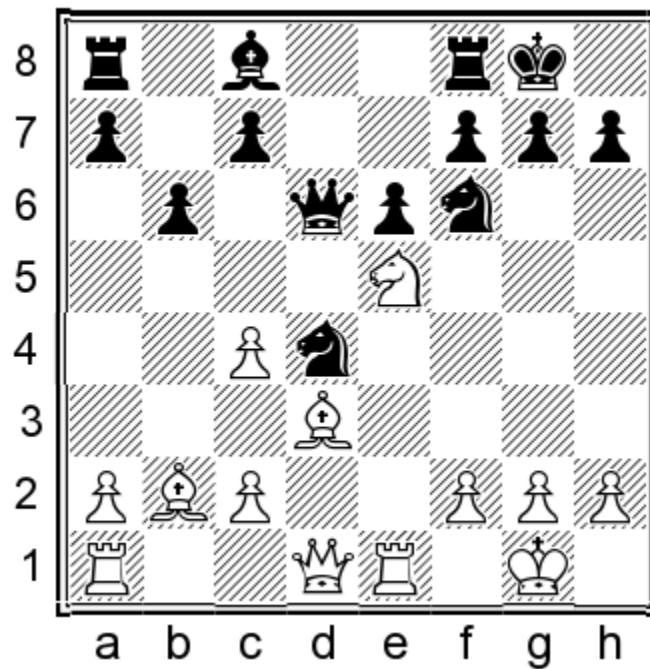


*Position after: 14.f3*

14...Qc5+ [14...Nd7? loses the b7-bishop: 15.Be4 Qc5+ 16.Be3+-.] 15.Be3 Qxe5 16.Bxb6 Qd6 17.Bf2<sup>2</sup> White retains a nice edge thanks to their bishop pair.

**A2)** 11...Qxd4? is simply impossible 12.Ba3 Nxe5 13.Bxh7++-.

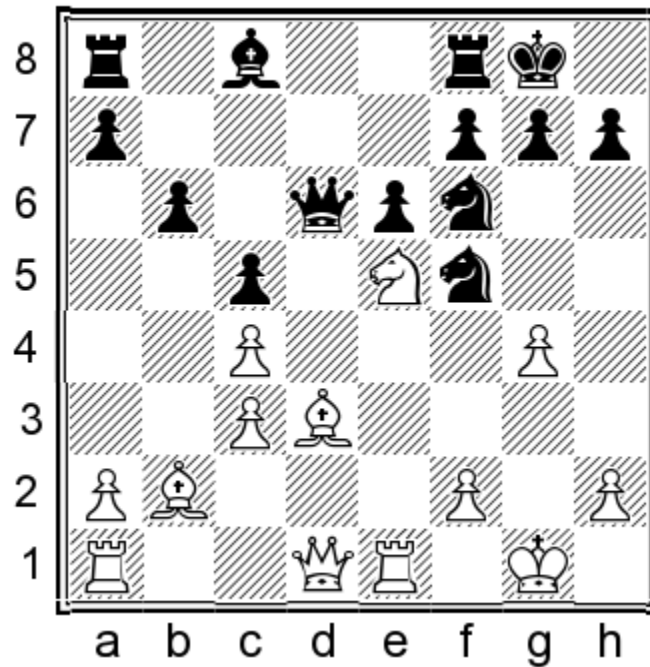
**A3)** 11...Nxd4 12.Bb2!



*Position after: 12.Bb2!*

Black is seriously underdeveloped and can only choose between several evils. 12...c5 [12...g6 is also not great, as after 13.Bxg6 fxg6 14.Bxd4 the weakening of the long diagonal will be felt. The presence of opposite-colored bishops only serves to strengthen White's initiative.] 13.c3 Nf5 14.g4!

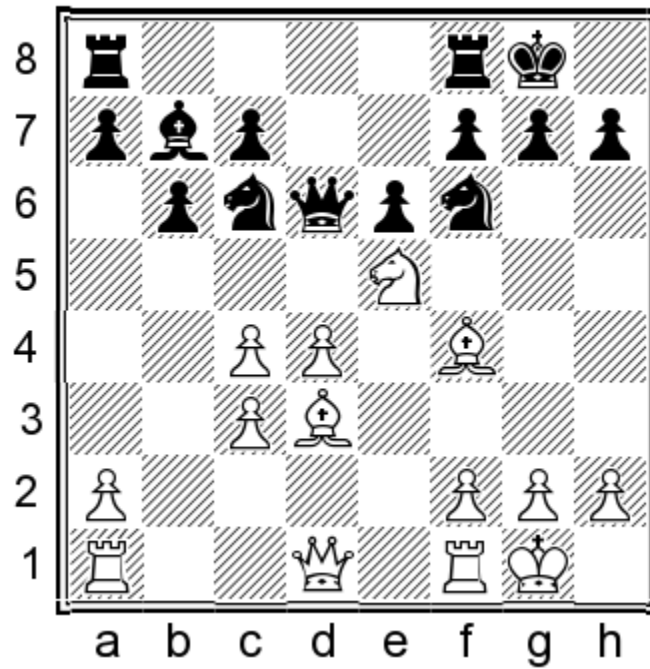




*Position after: 14.g4!*

And Black has to give up the knight as 14...Ne7? runs into the trick 15.Bxh7+-.

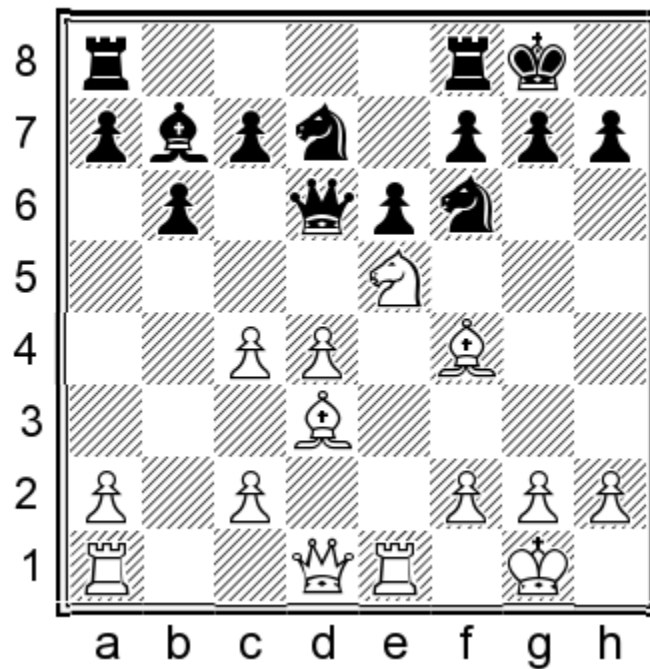
**B)** 10...Bb7 is the easiest move to meet as it does not put enough pressure on White's center. After 11.Bf4 Nc6 [11...Nbd7 transposes to our main line] 12.c3<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 12.c3<sup>2</sup>*

there is not much to discuss as White has consolidated their edge.

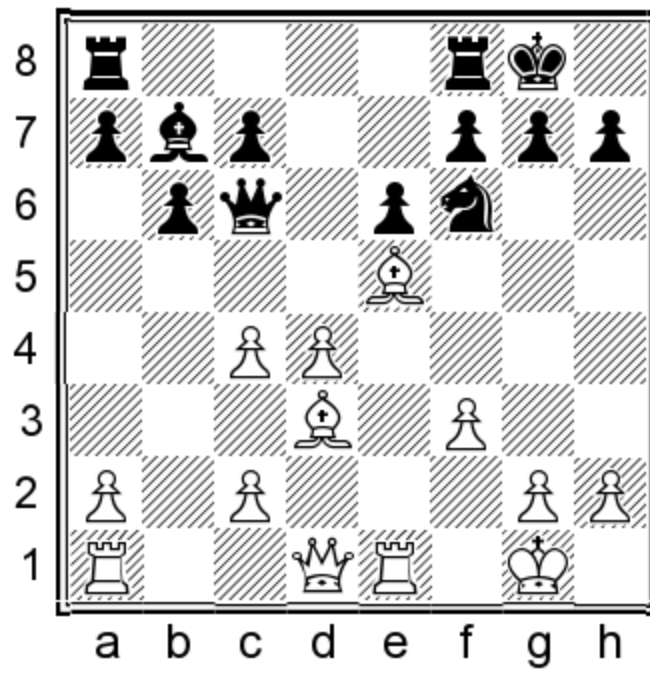
**11.Bf4 Bb7 12.Re1**



*Position after: 12.Re1*

White can further reinforce their position with c2-c3. They could have immediately started collecting material with Ne5-g6, but there is no need to rush things as Black does not have much counterplay anyway. In case of 12...Nxe5 don't get carried away with 13.dxe5 as it is not winning a piece yet due to the ...Qc6 trick. Recapture with the bishop instead: 13.Bxe5 Qc6 14.f3<sup>2</sup>

and White will enjoy a clearly better position as the b7-bishop's scope is limited and White's dark-squared bishop has no competition.

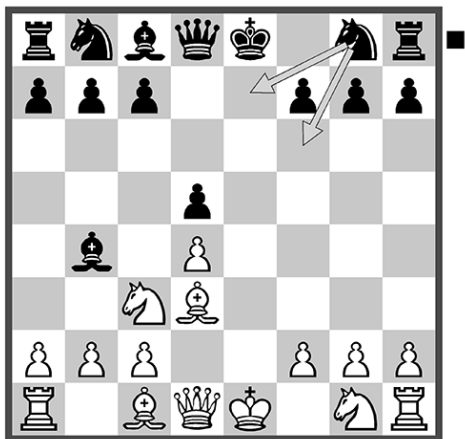


*Position after: 14.f3<sup>2</sup>*

# Chapter 19

**...Nf6 & ...Ne7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3**



# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 19 - ...Nf6 & ...Ne7

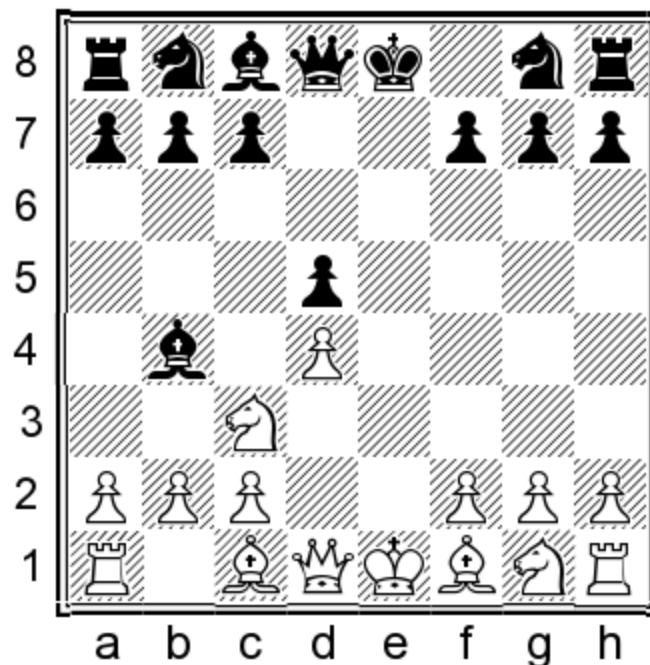
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3

a) 5...Nf6

b) 5...Ne7

### a) 5...Nf6

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5**



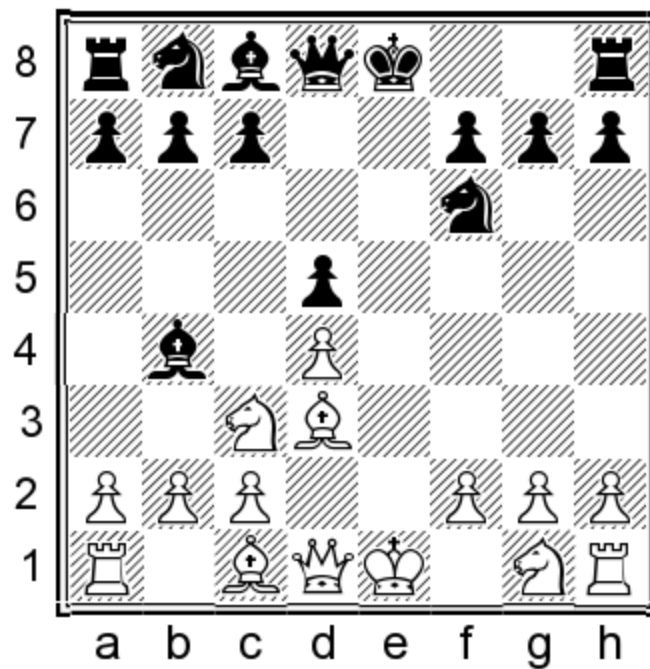
*Position after: 4...exd5*

One might argue that the position is too symmetrical for White to claim an advantage. However, there are many examples of seemingly dry opening positions that have suddenly come back into fashion more recently. The

supposedly “boring” exchange Slav, which these days is being employed even at the top level, is just one example.

Exchanging on d5 even as early as on move 3 is not entirely without poison, and there are some games where White has been able to pose Black some problems. Our situation is a bit more advantageous though as the b4-bishop is not so well placed.

### 5.Bd3 Nf6



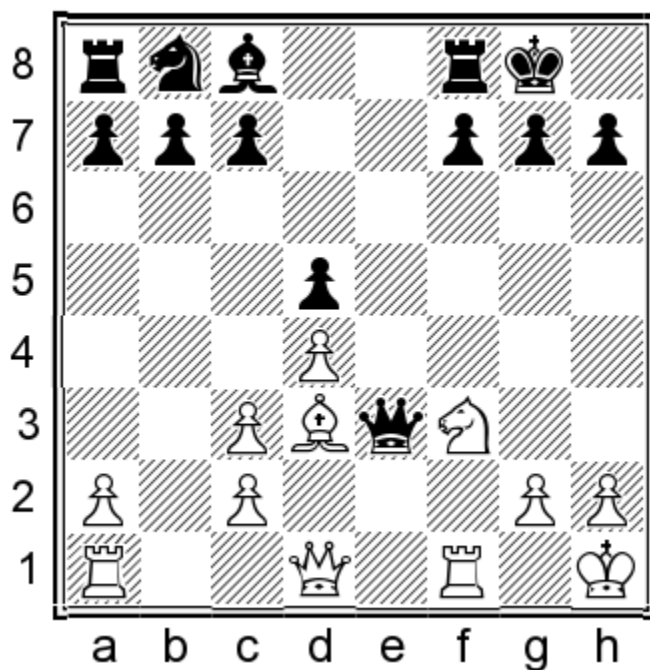
*Position after: 5...Nf6*

This will lead to a calm game. The position will simplify quite a bit but White will be able to claim some edge anyway, even in endgames.

### 6.Nge2

White's plan will always be very simple here. They first castle, then expel the b4-bishop with a3, and then continue developing with Bf4 and Qd2. Black will have some trouble developing the c8-bishop, and our position should simply be more pleasant to play.

6.Nf3 I wanted to make this move work. However, Black has 6...Qe7+! and White is practically forced to either exchange queens or give away their dark-squared bishop.  
 7.Be3 Ng4 8.0-0 Nxe3 9.fxe3 Qxe3+ 10.Kh1 Bxc3 11.bxc3 0-0



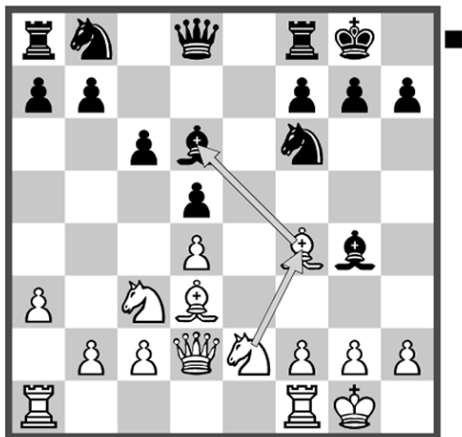
*Position after: 11...0-0*

White's compensation for the pawn is not enough for more than equality, e.g. 12.Ne5 Nd7 13.Qh5 g6 14.Nxg6 hxg6 15.Bxg6= and White does not have enough pieces to claim more than a draw.

**6...0-0**

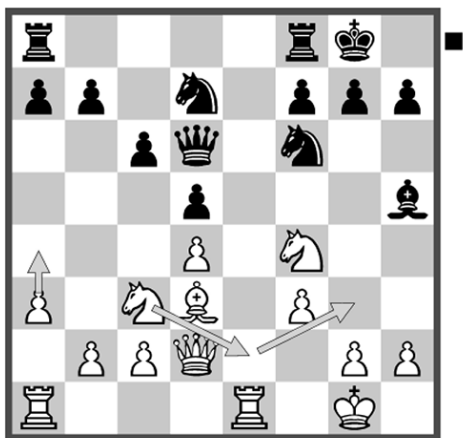


**A)** 6...c6 is theoretically less precise than castling as it gives White an extra option of choosing another set-up with Ng3. 7.0-0 0-0 8.a3 For the sake of simplicity we will focus on our universal a3, Bf4 set-up. [With ...c6 played instead of ...Re8 White has the option of playing 8.Ng3!? as well, trying to save a tempo on a3 and play the slightly more natural c3 instead. 8...Re8 9.Nce2 Bd6 10.c3<sup>2</sup>] 8...Bd6 9.Bf4 Bg4 10.Qd2



*Position after: 10.Qd2*

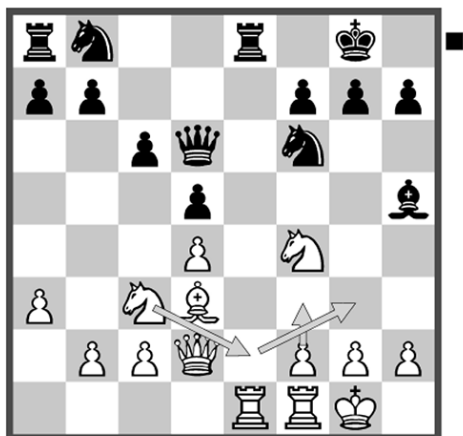
**A1)** 10...Qc7 11.Bxd6 Qxd6 12.Nf4 [It is quite possible to offer an endgame with 12.Qf4, though Black is not obliged to accept it, and can retreat with 12...Qd8. We need the f4-square for the knight, so the queen might prove to be a bit awkwardly placed there.] 12...Nbd7 13.f3 Bh5 14.Rfe1<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 14.Rfe1<sup>2</sup>*

White can continue with Nce2, with the Ng3 maneuver in mind, and then maybe expand on the queenside with a4 as well. At some point Black will have to play ...Bg6 and allow their kingside pawn structure to be weakened by Nxg6. In any case White has the easier game here.

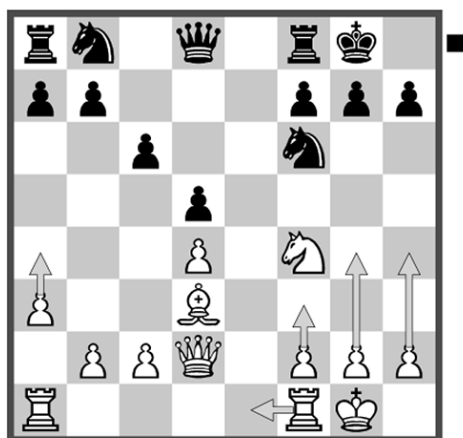
**A2)** 10...Re8 11.Rae1 It was possible to capture on d6 straight away but since Rae1 is a useful waiting move, we simply wait for Black's response. After all they might play ...Qc7, and then capturing on d6 wins a tempo! 11...Bh5 As this move is threatening to exchange our d3-bishop with ...Bg6, we can consider it a signal for Bxd6 and Nf4. 12.Bxd6 Qxd6 13.Nf4<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 13.Nf4<sup>2</sup>*

Again, White is slightly better here. First they will cover the e4-square with f3, and then they will start maneuvering the c3-knight, most likely with Nce2-g3.

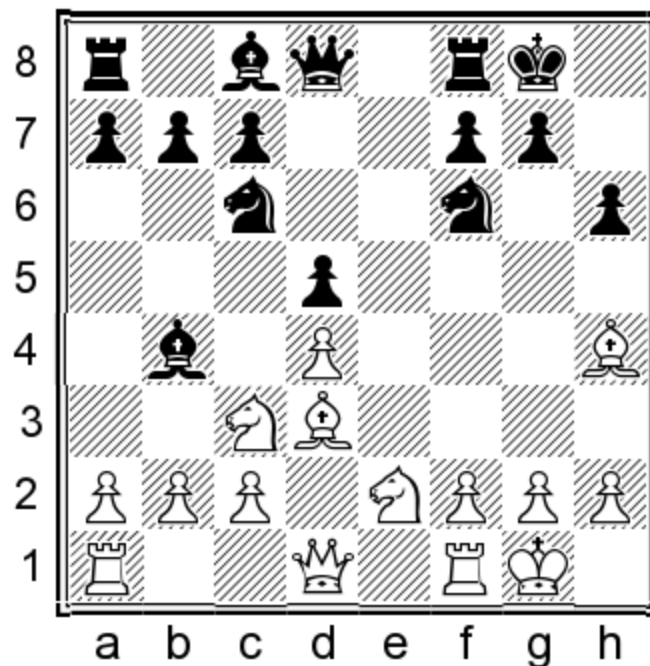
**A3)** 10...Bxe2 The dream of Black's light-squared bishop is to be exchanged for one of their opponent's minor pieces, so it makes sense to do so right away; otherwise White continues with Bxd6 and Nf4 when the g4-bishop might get into trouble. 11.Nxe2 Bxf4 12.Nxf4<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 12.Nxf4<sup>2</sup>*

White can limit the f6-knight with f3 and then enjoy their slight advantage. Besides fighting for the e-file with Rfe1 (Rfe1) they can explore the options of advancing on the queenside with a4 or even pushing their kingside pawns, trying to grab more space.

**B)** 6...Nc6 made sense with White's knight on f3 but here it is pointless and Black will have some problems defending the d5-pawn after 7.Bg5 h6 8.Bh4 0-0 9.0-0.

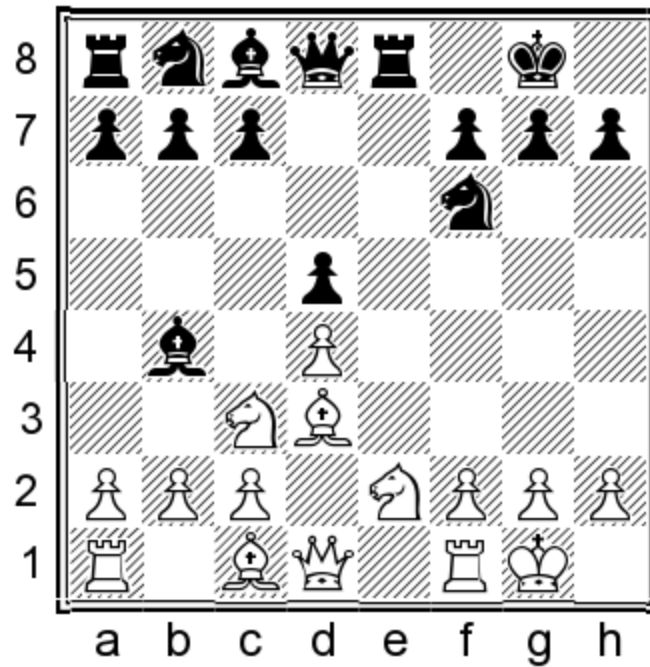


*Position after: 9.0-0*

If Black tries to unpin their queen with 9...Be7, then after 10.a3!<sup>2</sup>, defending against ...Nb4, Black's position is cramped and White will simply develop with f3, Bf2, Qd2, and Re1.

## 7.0-0 Re8

7...c6 8.a3 Bd6 transposes into the 6...c6 variation.



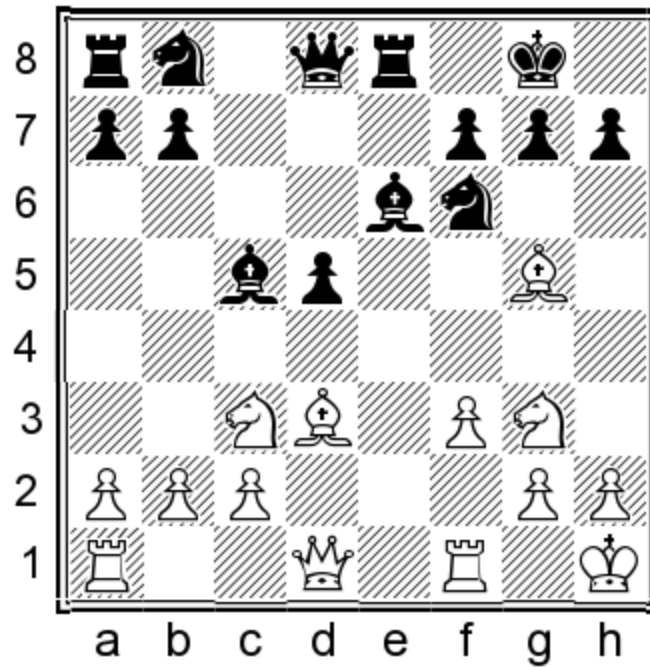
*Position after: 7...Re8*

This is a better move order than 6...c6 as it keeps the option of playing ...c5 after Ng3.

### **8.a3**

White can start maneuvering with 8.Ng3 too but here Black has an extra option of 8...c5 9.dxc5 Bg4

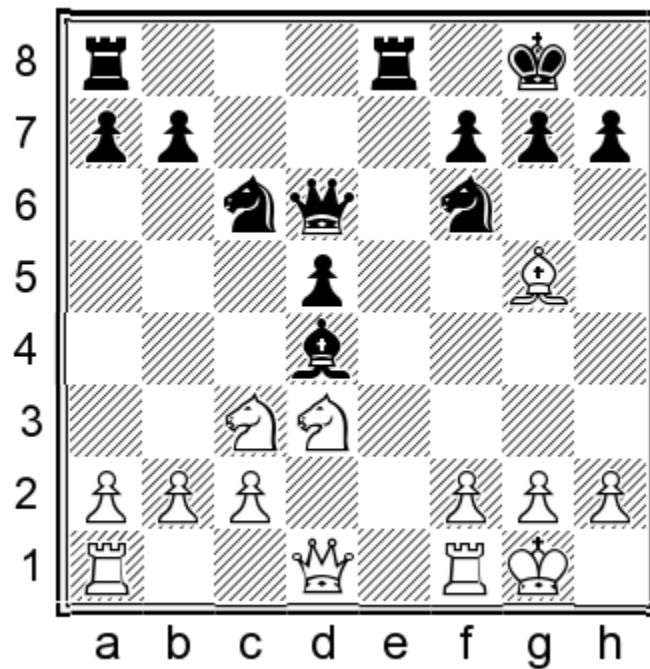
**A)** 10.f3 is the usual way of dealing with an enemy bishop on g4 but the dark-squared complex in White's camp is rather weak in this case. I analyzed the following interesting plan for White 10...Bxc5+ 11.Kh1 Be6 12.Bg5.



*Position after: 12.Bg5*

Things can start heating up pretty quickly for Black here, especially if they give White tempi for their attack with 12...h6 13.Bxf6 Qxf6 14.f4. Things are not so easy after some less cooperative alternatives like ...Nbd7 on move 12 though.

**B)** 10.Be2 Bxe2 11.Ngxe2 Bxc5 12.Bg5 Nc6 13.Nf4 Qd6 14.Nd3 It is not so easy to tame Black's active pieces after 14...Bd4.



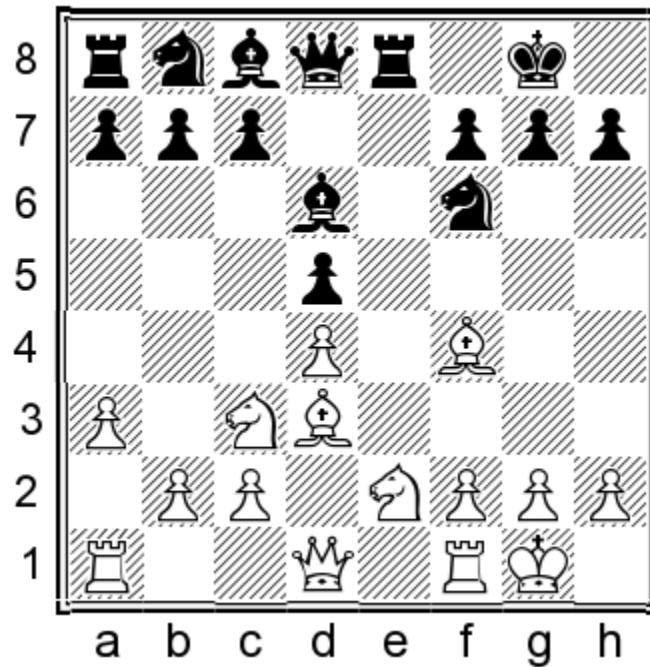
*Position after: 14...Bd4*

You can certainly analyze this position further but my recommendation is not to give Black so much activity.

### **8...Bd6**

Retreating to other squares with, say, 8...Be7, is not very logical as the bishop is passive and we simply continue with 9.Bf4.

### **9.Bf4**

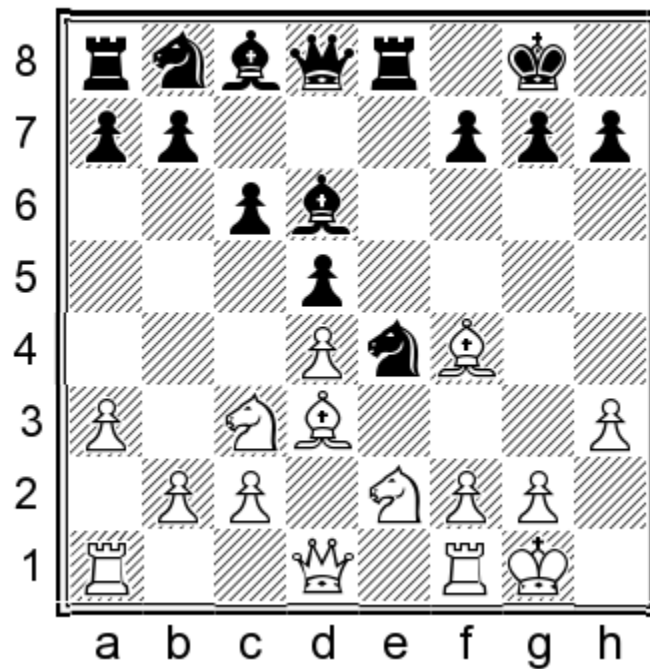


*Position after: 9.Bf4*

### **9...Bg4**

9...c6 The combination of ...Re8 and ...c6 allows us to be a bit smart and make the c8-bishop feel uncomfortable with 10.h3 [10.Qd2 Bg4 11.Rae1 is a possible alternative and our usual set-up. This position is also better for White and we analyze it via the move order 6...c6.] Fabiano Caruana tried to alter the course of the game against me radically with 10...Ne4

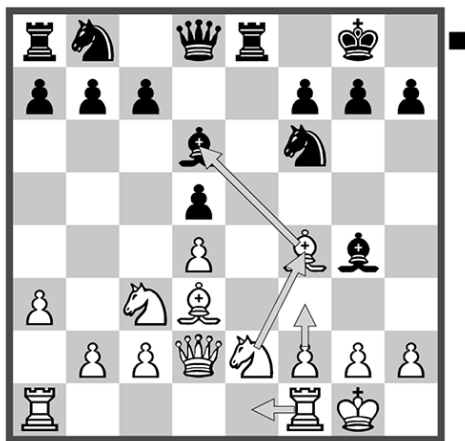




*Position after: 10...Ne4*

and although the game eventually ended in a draw, White was better after 11.Bxe4 dxe4 as Black is a little overextended with their pawn on e4.

## 10.Qd2

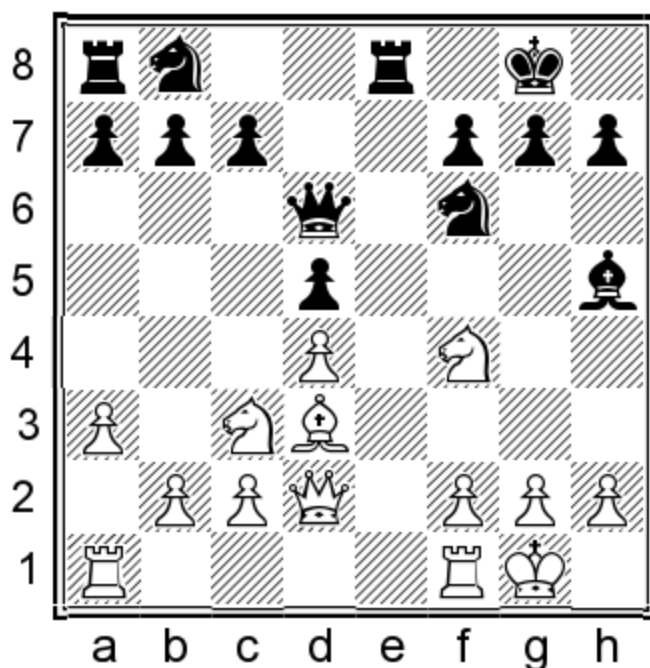


*Position after: 10.Qd2*

Continuing to develop in the usual fashion. We intend to exchange the dark-squared bishops, play Nf4, and put the king's rook on e1. We should watch out for ...Ne4 which can become an issue if we start maneuvering the c3-knight, so it is often useful to include f3. Also, we should not allow the d3-bishop to be exchanged so when Black plays ...Bh5, we should exchange on d6 and play Nf4, so that the knight can remove Black's light-squared bishop.

### 10...Bxe2

Remember, 10...Bh5 is the signal for 11.Bxd6 Qxd6 12.Nf4!



*Position after: 12.Nf4!*

12...Bg6 13.Nxg6 hxg6 14.Rfe1<sup>2</sup>.

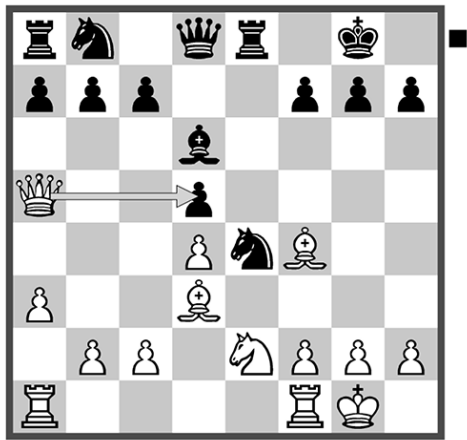
### 11.Nxe2

If Black does not come up with something special then we will get our favorite set-up with f3, Rfe1, Bxd6, and Nf4. But even after 11...Ne4

White retains an edge with...

## 12.Qa5!

(the d5-pawn is hanging!)

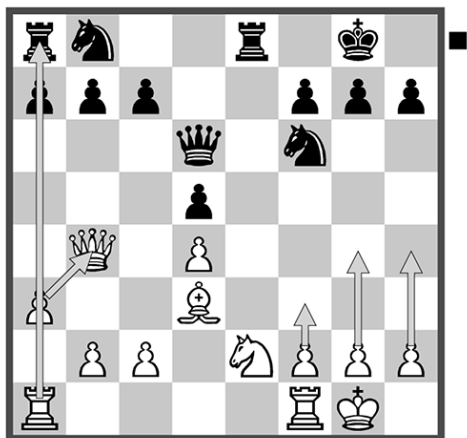


*Position after: 12.Qa5*

## 12...Nf6

12...c6 13.Qxd8 Rxd8 14.f3 gives White a pleasant edge. Besides useful moves like Kf2 (the king should be close to the center in the endgame!) they can expand on the kingside with g4 and h4.

## 13.Bxd6 Qxd6 14.Qb4<sup>2</sup>

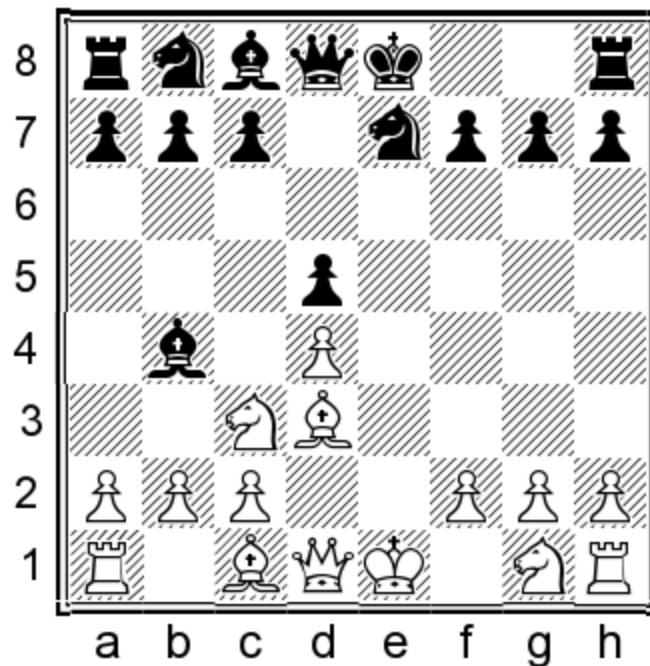


*Position after: 14.Qb4<sup>2</sup>*

We would love to get the semi-open a-file after ...Qxb4, axb4 as even in the ending White has some advantage. If queens are swapped off then White can happily start rolling their pawns forward on the kingside with f3, g4, and h4.

**b) 5...Ne7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3 Ne7**

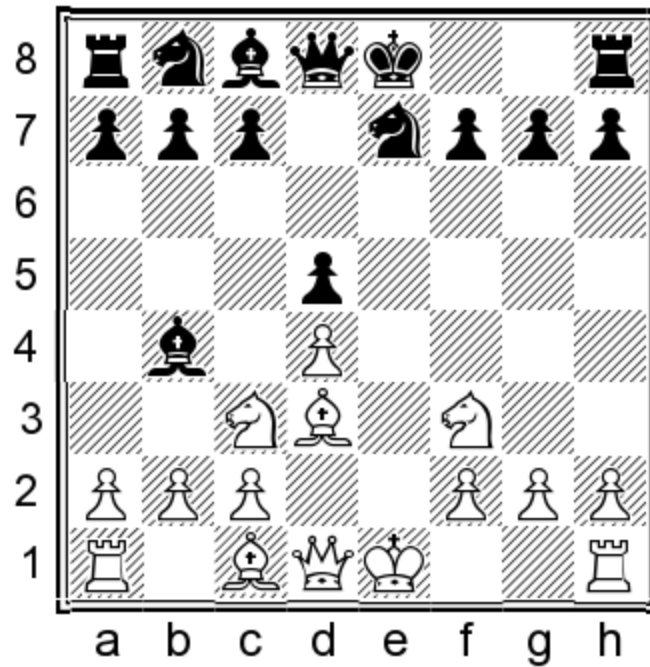


*Position after: 5...Ne7*

## 6.Nf3

The rule of thumb for us is that our king's knight takes the position asymmetrical to its opposite-colored colleague. The more asymmetry we create, the more play we are able to generate.

6.Qh5 takes the asymmetry theory to a whole new level. Although it stops Black from castling kingside, the queen's trip to h5 looks a bit strange and it will run into some troubles after 6...Be6 7.Nge2 Qd7 8.0-0 Bg4 when Black will eventually be able to castle. 9.Qg5 0-0 and our queen is awkwardly placed.

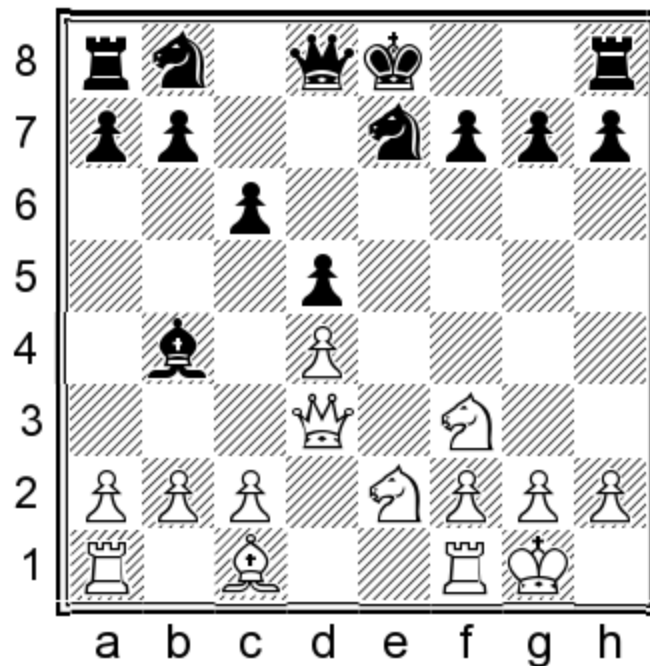


*Position after: 6.Nf3*

### **6...Nbc6**

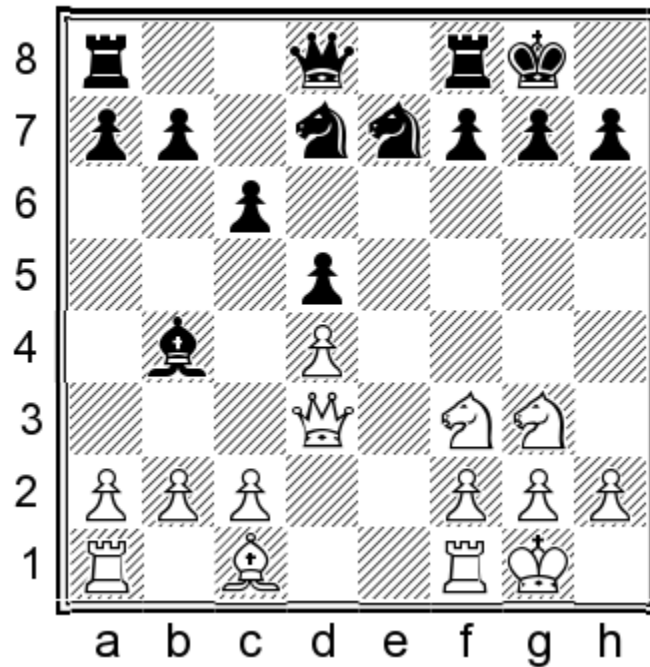
In any case we will simply castle and then start maneuvering the c3-knight with Ne2.

6...Bf5 7.0-0 Bxd3 8.Qxd3 c6 9.Ne2!



*Position after: 9.Ne2!*

Similar structures often arise from the Petroff Defense (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6). White can place their knight on g3, play c3, and occupy the open e-file with their rooks. Even though Black's position is solid, White's plan is very simple to execute and they enjoy the slightly better game. I am pretty sure any Petroff specialist would be more than happy with such an outcome from the opening with White. 9...0-0 10.Ng3 Nd7

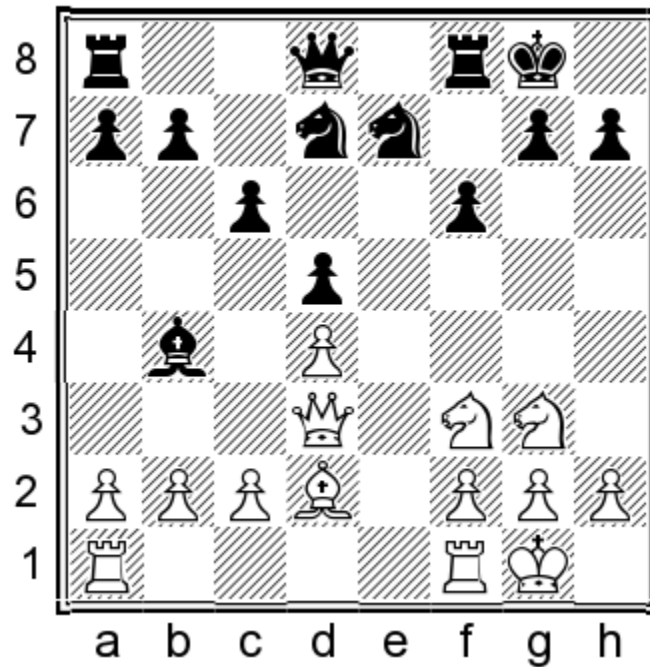


*Position after: 10...Nd7*

**A)** In a similar position with Black's queen's knight on c6 (and c3, ...Bd6 included) I investigated 11.Ng5 Ng6 12.f4, however the knight contributes to the defense of the f6-square quite a lot from d7 and it is hard to continue the attack after 12...Re8 13.f5 Ngf8.

**B)** 11.Bg5 GM Negi (unfaithful to his repertoire book where he suggests the variation 4.e5 instead) used this move to beat GM Naroditsky in a recent game. The move aims to install a knight on f5 which is something Black would definitely like to avoid. 11...f6 [Negi was able to claim the f5-square after 11...h6 12.Bxe7 Bxe7 13.Nf5] 12.Bd2

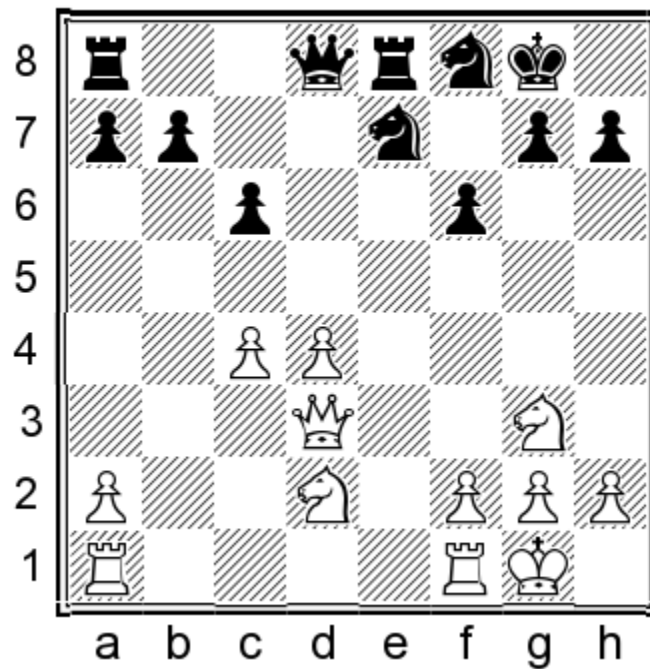




*Position after: 12.Bd2*

Now we switch to central play with b3 and c4. The dark-squared bishop has at least succeeded in weakening the e6-square and can be exchanged knowing it contributed to White's mission. 12...Bxd2 13.Nxd2 Re8 14.b3 Nf8 15.c4

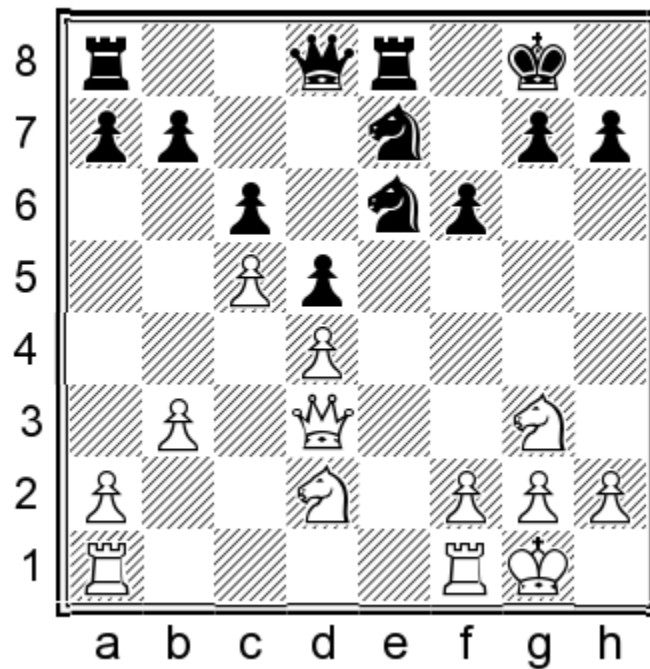
**B1)** 15...dxc4 is a bit of a concession and gives White the advantage in the center after 16.bxc4.



*Position after: 16.bxc4*

We will continue with natural moves, extending their control over the position and supporting White's central pawns 16...Ne6 17.Nf3 Qd7 18.a4 Rad8 19.Rfd1 with a slightly more pleasant position for White. They should mainly try to keep the position under control, so a move like Qc2 might come in handy – just so that the queen would not be under fire after a possible ...Nf4. Then they should decide the a1-rook's fate – one idea might be to play Rab1 and try to generate some pressure on b7, possibly with Qb2 to come. Another is to play Rd2 and maneuver the queen's rook to one of the two central files with Rad1 or Re1.

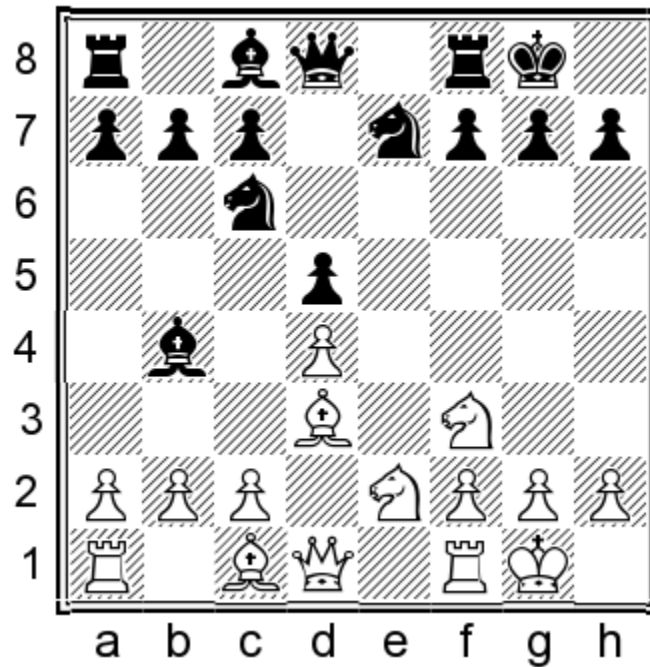
**B2)** 15...Ne6 16.c5



*Position after: 16.c5*

We try to grab as much space as possible. Black can simplify a bit with 16...b6 17.b4 a5 18.a3 axb4 19.axb4 Rxa1 20.Rxa1 bxc5 21.bxc5 Ng6 22.Nf3, but they can never really undermine our central pawn formation. Although this position is close to equality for a computer, in practice it is not so easy to play for the second player. The c6-pawn is a greater weakness than the d4-pawn and Black's pieces don't have as much space as White's.

**7.0-0 0-0 8.Ne2**



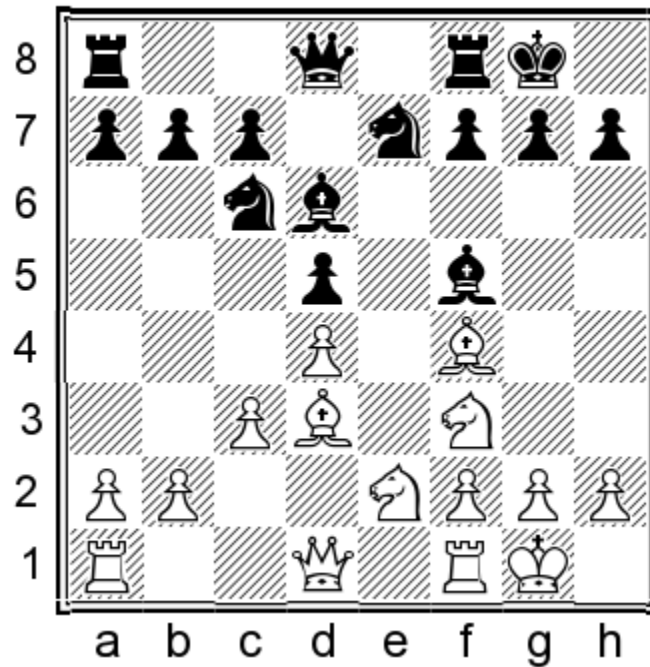
*Position after: 8.Ne2*

This is a rather typical idea, harmonizing White's queenside and bringing the knight to a more useful square.

### **8...Bg4**

Black is trying to disrupt our set-up but tactics will not work in their favor.

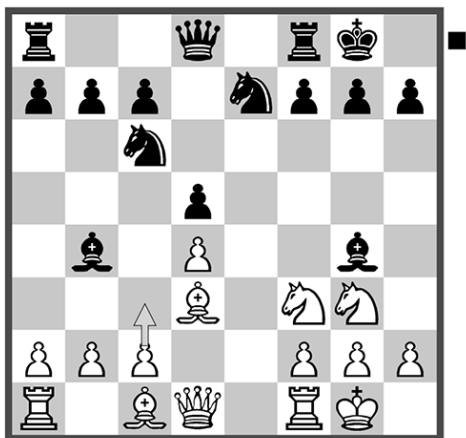
If Black chooses the 8...Bf5 set-up then White can even go for the bishop-less position with 9.c3 Bd6 10.Bf4.



*Position after: 10.Bf4*

White is better thanks to the awkward position of the c6-knight. Black would like to play ...c6 and bolster the d5-pawn, but it is kind of difficult to execute the pawn move with a knight obstructing its path. At the same time Black would also like to control the e5-square to prevent White's pieces from invading. We simply build our usual set-up with Re1 and Ng3 (after exchanging on d6).

**9.Ng3**



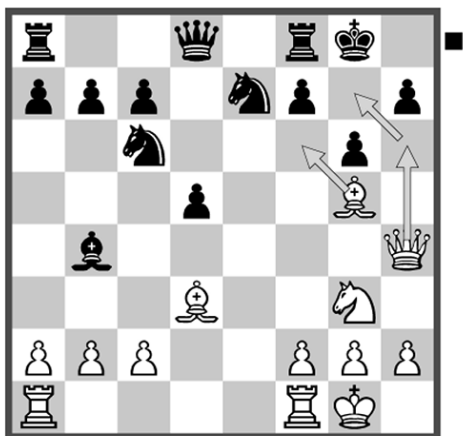
*Position after: 9.Ng3*

If White manages to get c3 in then Black's ...Bg4 move would make no sense at all because the only point of ...Bg4 is to create pressure on d4.

### **9...Nxd4??**

This is very tempting but, unfortunately for Black, pretty much lost as well.

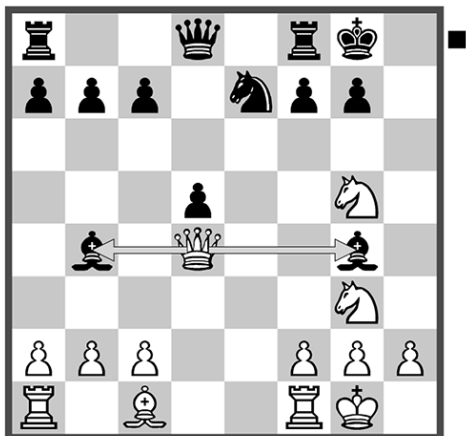
9...Bxf3 is the only other option left for Black besides agreeing to a miserable set-up after White gets to play c3, but White will have great compensation after 10.Qxf3 Nxd4 11.Qh5 g6 [11...h6 loses a full piece to 12.c3+-.] 12.Qh4 Ndc6 13.Bg5!.



*Position after: 13.Bg5!*

As White threatens to play Bf6, when mating threats like Qh6-g7 start to appear, Black is basically forced to play 13...f5. But then we just open the position for our bishop pair with 14.Rad1!, intending c4. White can also maneuver the g3-knight to f4 later, trying to exploit the e6-weakness.

**10.Bxh7+ Kxh7 11.Ng5+ Kg8 12.Qxd4+-**

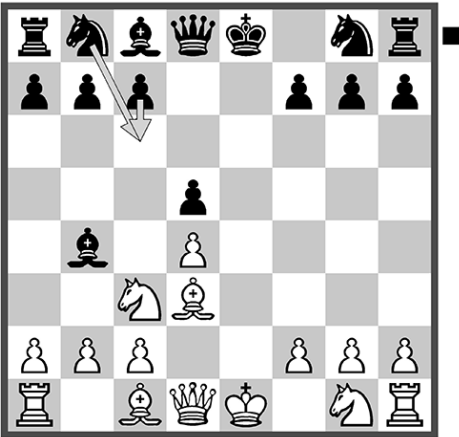


*Position after: 12.Qxd4+- And Black loses one of their bishops and the game.*

# Chapter 20

## ...Nc6 & ...c6

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3





# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 20 - ...Nc6 & ...c6

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3

a) 5...Nc6 & 7...Nxd4

b) 5...Nc6 & 7...Nge7

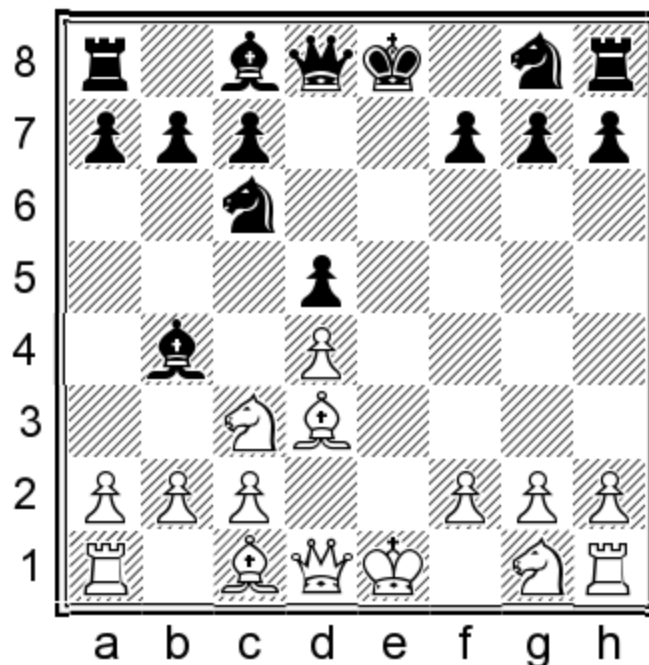
c) 5...c6 6.Qf3 Nf6 7.Bg5 Be7

d) 5...c6 6.Qf3 Nf6 7.Bg5 Bg4

e) 5...c6 6.Qf3 Qf6

### a) 5...Nc6 & 7...Nxd4

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3 Nc6**



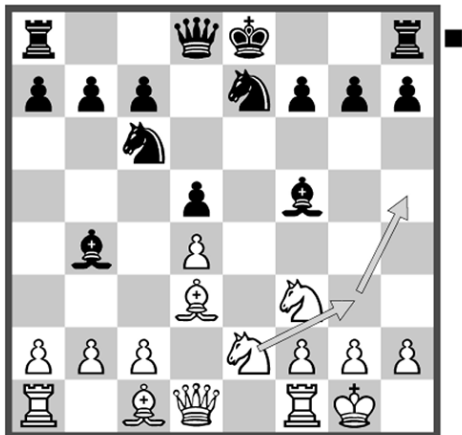
*Position after: 5...Nc6*

This is a rather ambitious try to refute White's set-up altogether by targeting the d4-pawn.

## 6.Nf3 Bg4

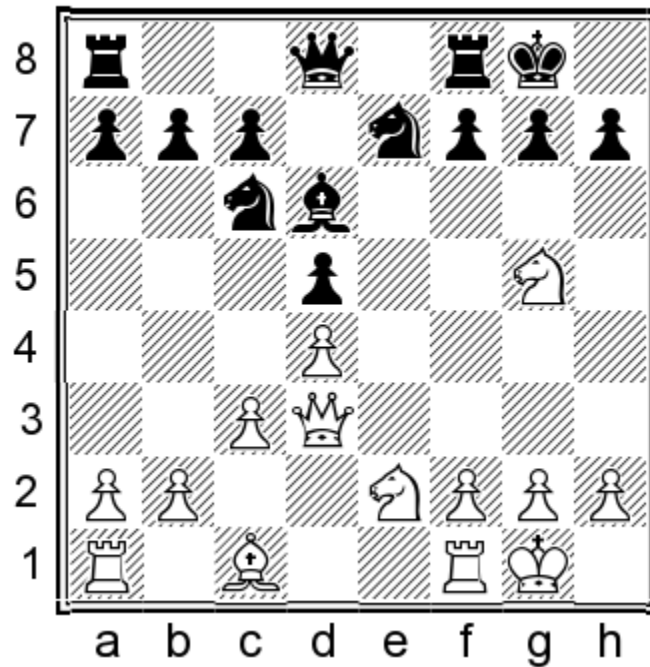
The idea is simple – Black wants to capture on d4.

6...Nge7 7.0-0 Bf5 is a bit of a hybrid system for Black. Many classical books on the opening recommend developing the kingside knight to e7 against a knight on f3, and developing the knight to f6 against a knight e2. It is a bit superficial to assume that Black will just manage to exchange all the pieces and make a draw, as White will have some potential on the kingside. [7...Bg4 is considered via the move order 6...Bg4 7.0-0 Nge7.] 8.Ne2!



*Position after: 8.Ne2!*

Now the Bb4 looks useless, whereas the knight is preparing to switch to the kingside in order to attack. 8...Bxd3 9.Qxd3 0-0 10.c3 We should protect the d4-square, and the bishop might be able to retreat all the way to e7 if we mix up the move order, so we better play c3 straight away. 10...Bd6 11.Ng5! It is time to storm the kingside.

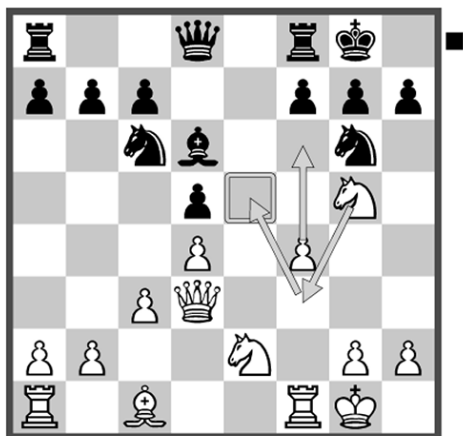


*Position after: 11.Ng5!*

**A)** Black is naturally hesitant to weaken the kingside with a move like 11...g6 because after 12.Qh3 the only defense against the checkmate on h7 is the ugly-looking 12...h5. However, White will force them to make some concessions one way or another.

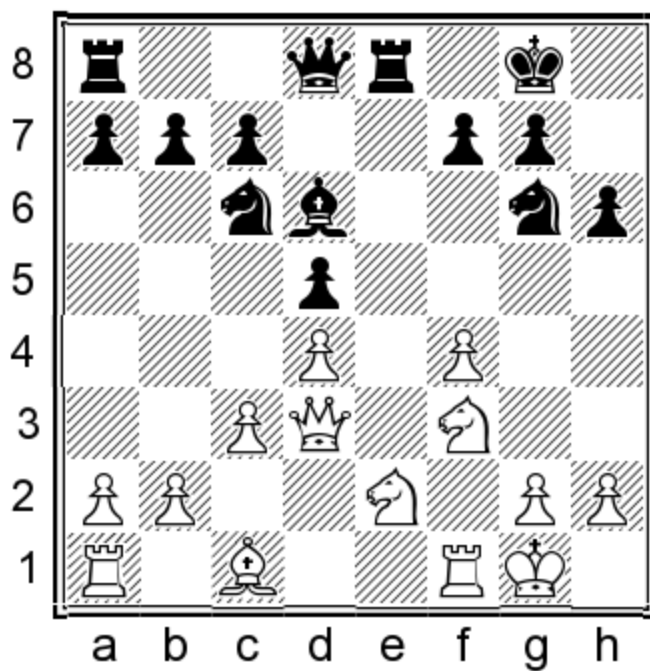
**B)** 11...f5 is not only terribly weakening, but it also loses material immediately to the fork 12.Ne6+-.

**C)** 11...Ng6 12.f4!



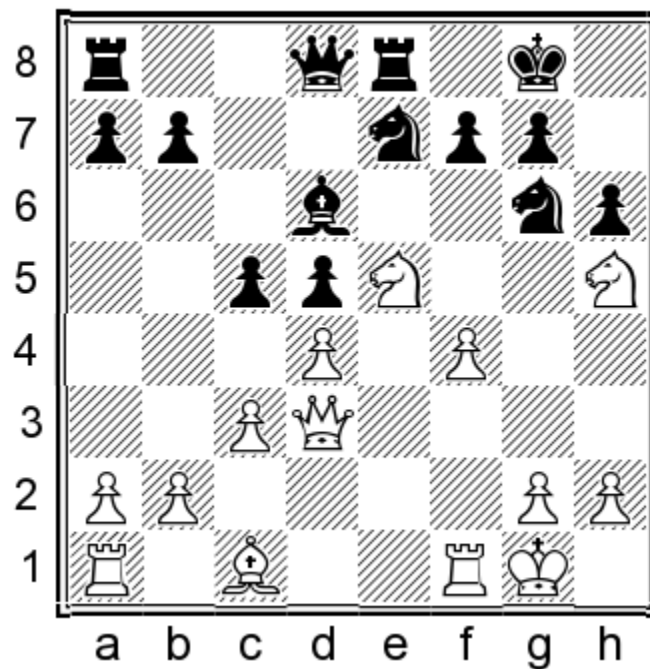
*Position after: 12.f4!*

The constant threat of f5-f6 is very unpleasant for Black. The pawn also gives White more control over the important e5-square, preparing the potential Nf3-e5 maneuver. 12...h6 Unfortunately, this is the price for stopping White from ramming the kingside with f5-f6. 13.Nf3 Re8



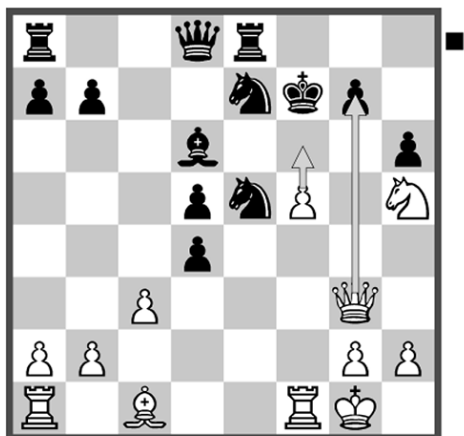
*Position after: 13...Re8*

14.Ne5 [Marching the f-pawn straight away is not such a big problem for Black right now as 14.f5 Nf8 15.f6? is unavailable due to the simple 15...Qxf6.] 14...Nce7 15.Ng3! White's knight is coming to support the attacking forces from the h5-square. This position is already very unpleasant for Black. 15...c5 16.Nh5



*Position after: 16.Nh5*

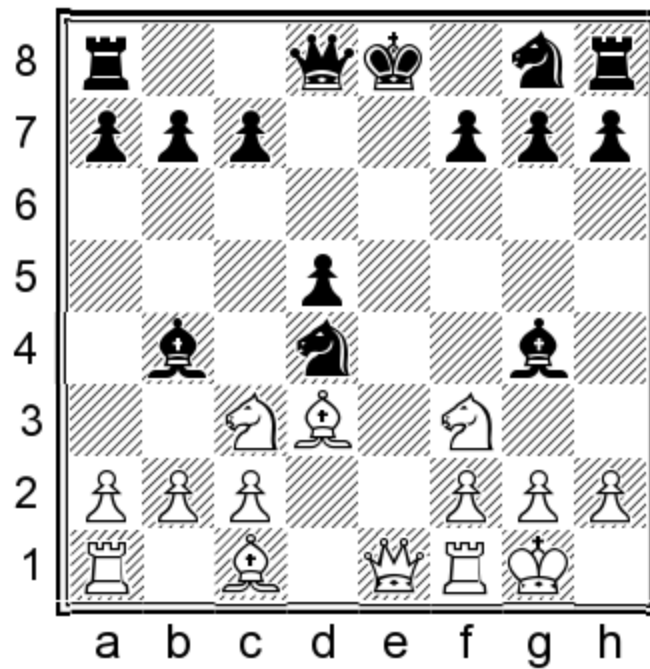
White can further improve their attacking position with Qh3 if needed, but they are already threatening to force their way through with a knight sacrifice! 16...cxd4 [16...Rf8 17.f5! Nxe5 18.dxe5 Bxe5 19.f6+- is also terrible.] 17.Nxf7! Kxf7 18.f5 Ne5 19.Qg3



*Position after: 19.Qg3*

Black's defenses will be demolished. White is threatening to capture on g7 as well as to open the position even more with f6. 19...Rg8 20.f6 gxf6 21.Rxf6+ Ke8 22.Ng7+ Rxf6 23.Qxg7+- Mathematically, Black is not doing so badly with two pieces for a rook, but the difference in piece activity is enormous. With a king in the center they have no hopes of survival after White gets the rest of their pieces out with Bf4 and Re1 (and possibly Kh1 to stop any annoying checks on b6).

**7.0-0 Nxd4 8.Qe1+!**

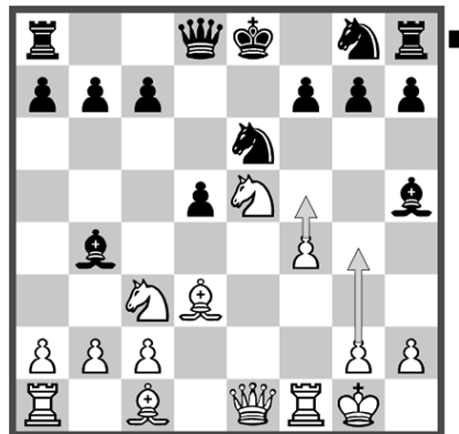


*Position after: 8.Qe1+!*

Moving away from the g4-d1 pin and forcing the active d4-knight to move as it would be hanging otherwise.

**8...Ne6 9.Ne5 Nf6**

9...Bh5 is even worse than 9...Nf6 as White employs the

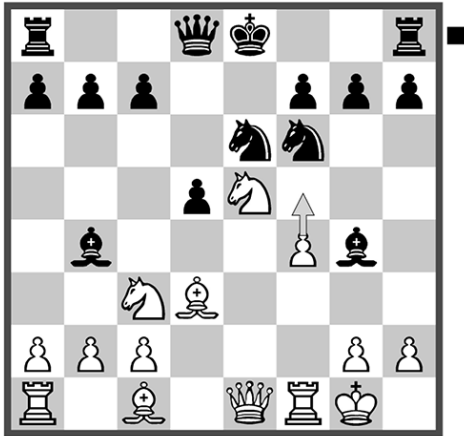


same plan with 10.f4,

*Position after: 10.f4*

already threatening both f5 and trapping the bishop with g4, f5. It makes more sense for Black to play the developing move instead, although White is always in control.

### 10.f4



*Position after: 10.f4*

Played with the simple idea of pushing f5. The only way to stop it is to enter tactical complications but unsurprisingly White emerges on top as their pieces are much better coordinated.

### 10...d4

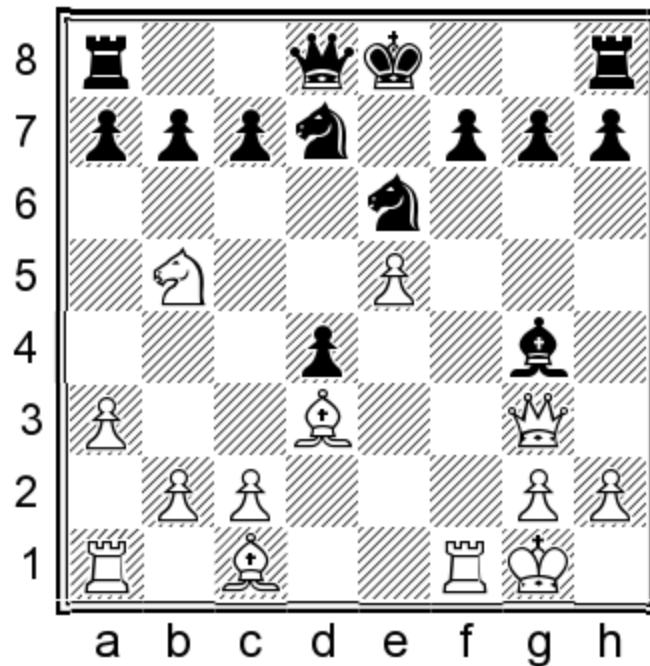
10...g6 only stops f5 momentarily and after 11.Nxg4 Nxg4 12.f5 gxf5 13.Bxf5± White is already on the verge of winning.

### 11.f5!

We need to be precise here. White temporarily sacrifices a piece which they will retrieve soon thanks to their pressure down the e-file.

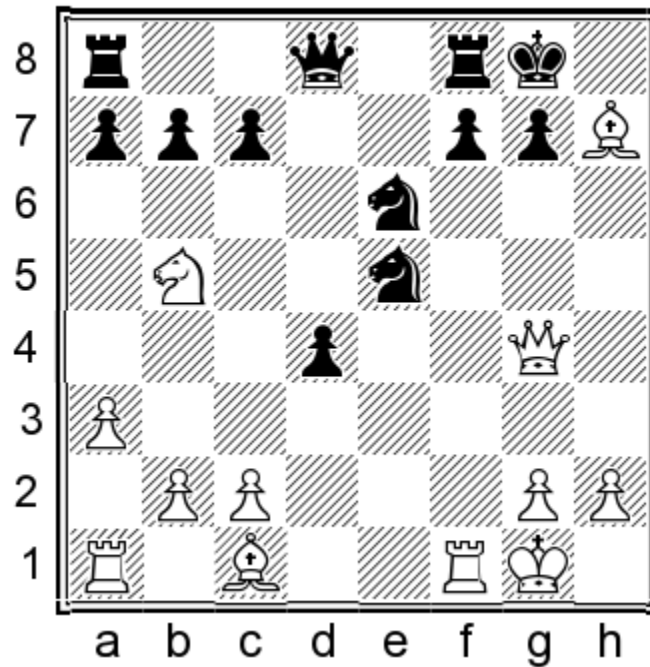


It is quite fun to analyze 11.a3, though Black will be able to save themselves. 11...Bd6™ 12.Nb5 Bxe5™ 13.fxe5 Nd7 14.Qg3



*Position after: 14.Qg3*

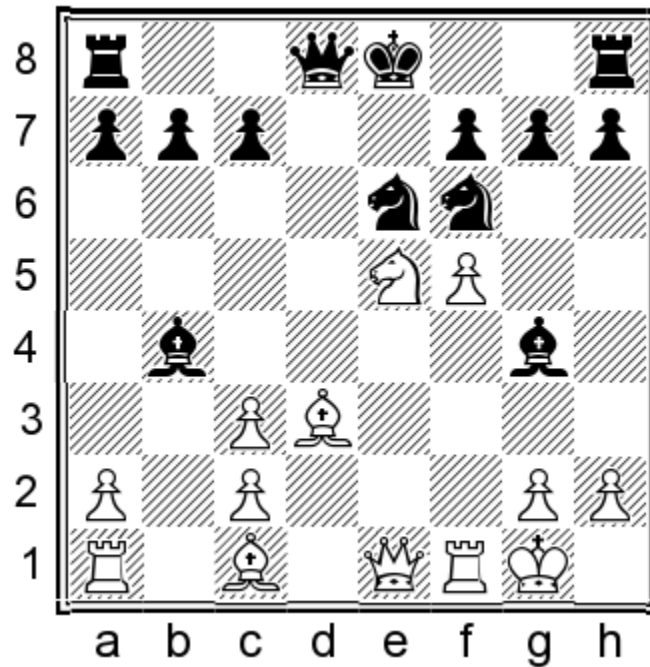
14...0-0! This move saves Black's position. With a bit of chess sorcery they will regain the b5-knight. [It would be great if Black was forced to go for 14...Bh5? 15.Qh3! Bg6 16.Bxg6 when White is winning a lot of material, but sadly this is not the case.] 15.Qxg4 Nxe5 16.Bxh7+



*Position after: 16.Bxh7+*

Things don't change for the b5-knight even if White moves their queen away immediately. 16...Kxh7 17.Qh5+ Kg8 18.Qxe5 a6! White's extra knight is doomed and the position will be roughly equal.

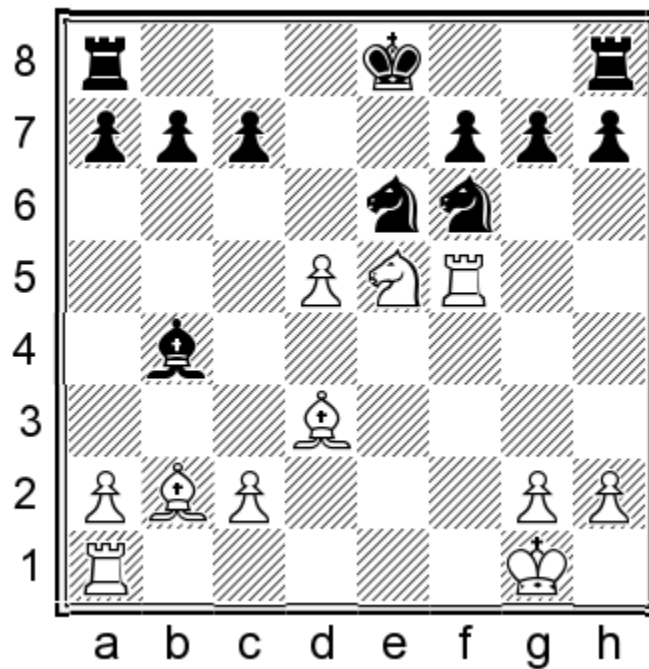
**11...dxc3™ 12.bxc3!**



*Position after: 12.bxc3!*

### **12...Bc5+**

12...Bxf5 13.Rxf5! Recapturing with the bishop is much less precise as the rook becomes very active on f5. 13...Qd4+ 14.cxd4 Bxe1 15.Bb2 Even though White is a pawn down and we have reached an endgame, they have great compensation thanks to their strong bishop pair. We can continue a bit further with 15...Bb4 16.d5!



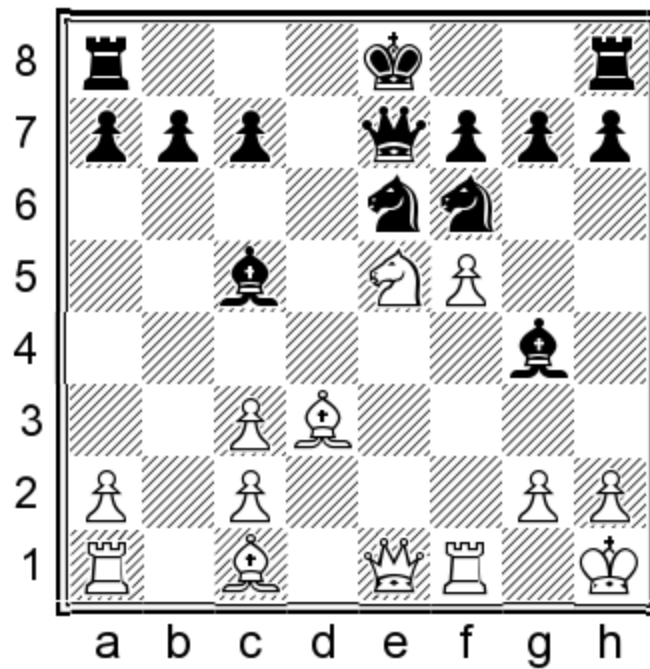
*Position after: 16.d5!*

when Black will eventually be completely tied down, e.g.  
 16...Nxd5 17.Nxf7 0-0 18.Rxd5 Rxf7 19.Re5 Re7 20.Bc4  
 Rae8 21.Rg5!± and their position is an unfavorable mess.

### **13.Kh1**

Black cannot hold onto their extra piece as without the e6-knight blocking the e-file White would have some very nasty discovered checks.

### **13...Qe7**

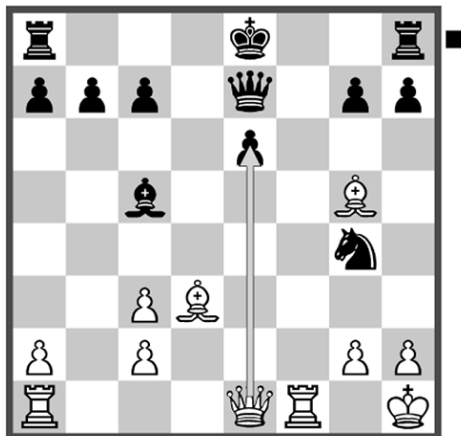


*Position after: 13...Qe7*

Blocking the e-file and trying to evacuate the king to the queenside.

### **14.fxe6**

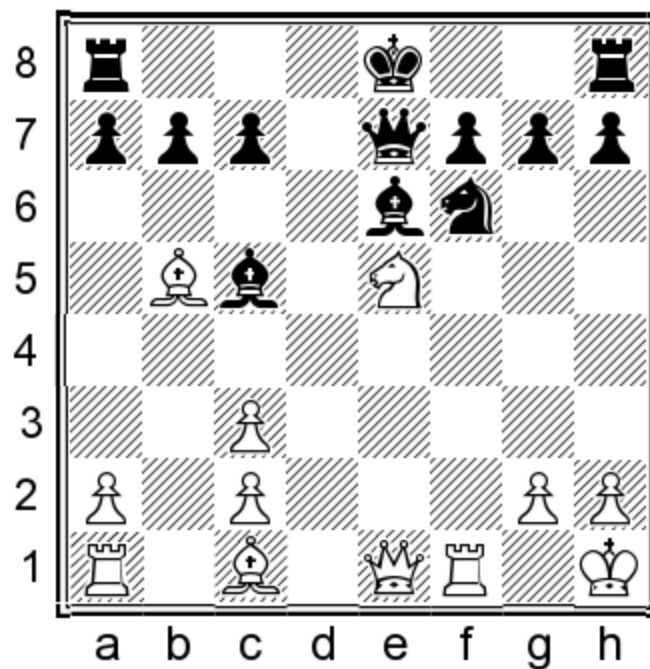
14.Nxg4 is also possible though White's advantage might be insufficient for playing for a win. 14...Nxg4 15.fxe6 fxe6 16.Bg5!



*Position after: 16.Bg5!*

White has some nice tricks but Black can just stay solid. 16...Nf6 17.Qe5 0-0 18.Rae1<sup>2</sup> Even though the engine prefers White here, I think it is very likely that the game will end in some opposite-color bishop endgame with an extra pawn after some mass exchanges, and the position will simply be a draw.

**14...Bxe6 15.Bb5+!**



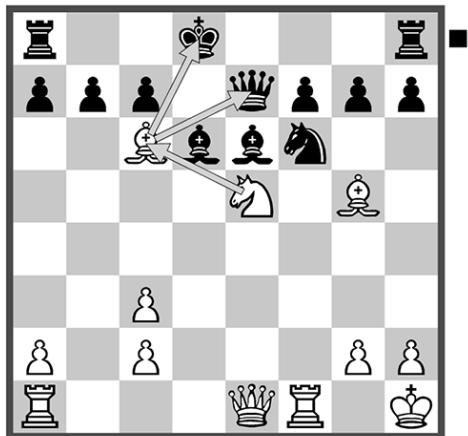
*Position after: 15.Bb5+!*

**15...Kd8**

**A)** Black has no choice but to compromise their king's position because 15...c6 runs into 16.Nxc6! bxc6 17.Bxc6+, winning the a8-rook.

**B)** 15...Kf8 is even worse because after 16.Bg5, intending Qh4 and taking on f6 (even with the rook just to keep the attack on dark squares going), Black's position is in a lot of danger.

**16.Bg5 Bd6 17.Bc6!?f**

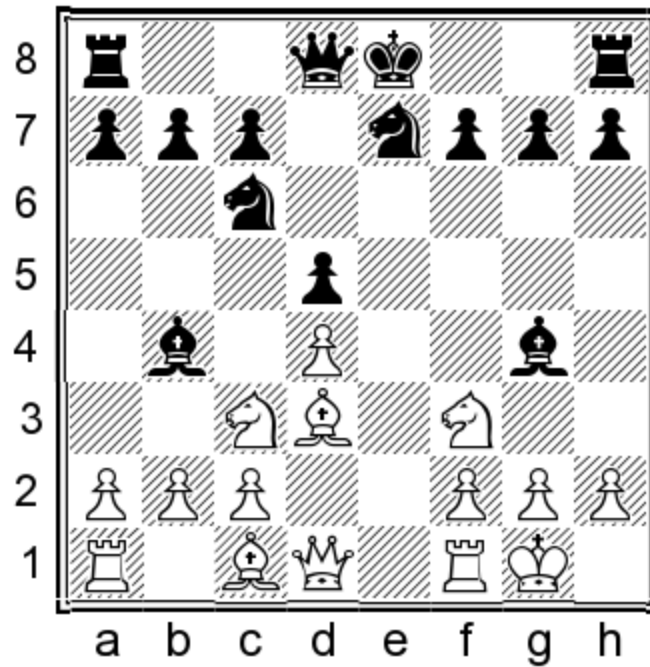


*Position after: 17.Bc6!?*

The position is quite complex and I would certainly take White here. The point of the last move is to create some weaknesses by pressuring the b7-square. White's bishop is taboo thanks to the knight fork on c6 and 17...Bxe5 18.Qxe5 bxc6 runs into 19.Rxf6!, when 19...gxf6? 20.Bxf6+- wins the black queen.

**b) 5...Nc6 & 7...Nge7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3 Nc6  
6.Nf3 Bg4 7.0-0 Nge7**



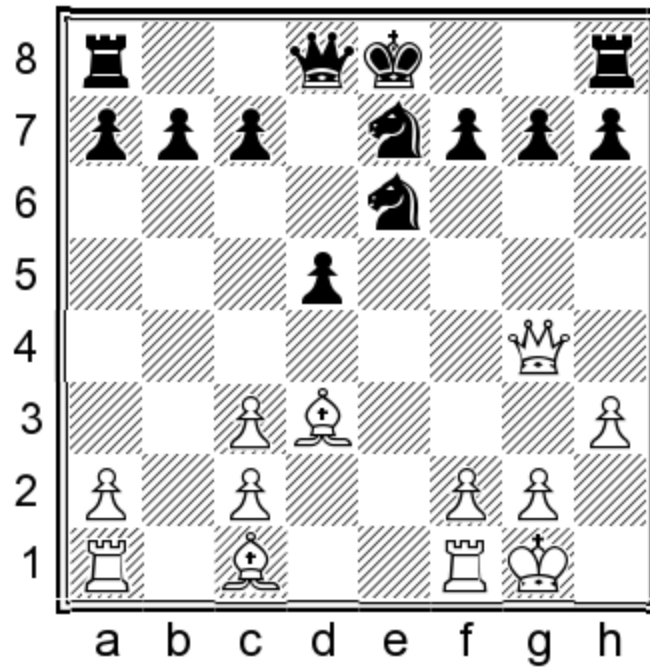
*Position after: 7...Nge7*

This timid move, delaying the capture on d4, does not score very well for Black in practice. Objectively speaking, some serious work might still be required from White though.

### **8.h3 Bh5**

8...Bxf3 is not great. 9.Qxf3 Nxd4 10.Qg4 Bxc3 (forced as the bishop was being x-rayed by the queen on g4) 11.bxc3 Ne6

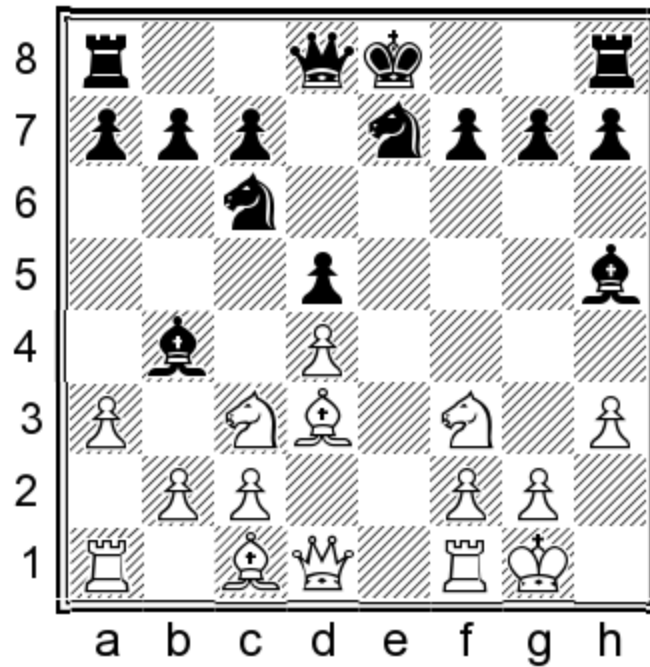




*Position after: 11...Ne6*

Black's position is cramped and White's bishops are able to generate even more pressure after 12.Rb1 b6 13.c4!©, opening the position. It should be quite fun to play this as White's bishops will have a lot of scope.

**9.a3**



*Position after: 9.a3*

### **9...Bxc3**

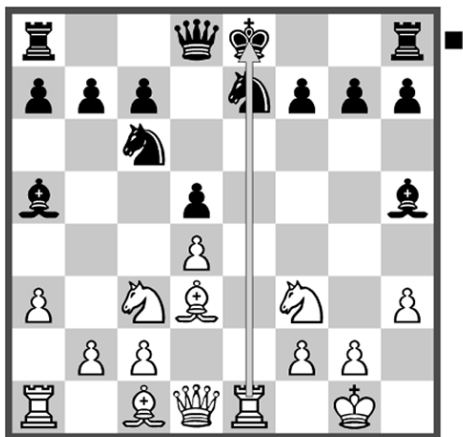
This is a bit of a concession as White gains the advantage of the bishop pair immediately. Nevertheless, in practice it is not so easy to convert White's pleasant position into something tangible, without some precise opening knowledge.

**A)** 9...Bd6 10.Re1 Bxf3 Black has to do something because their d5-pawn was already hanging. [10...0-0 runs into the trick 11.Bxh7+! Kxh7 12.Ng5+ Kg6 13.g4+-, and therefore Black accepts the sacrifice.; 10...Nxd4 11.g4 Nxf3+ 12.Qxf3 Bg6 13.Bxg6 hxg6 14.Nxd5± simply gives White a great position.] 11.Qxf3 Nxd4 12.Qxd5 c6 13.Qh5±



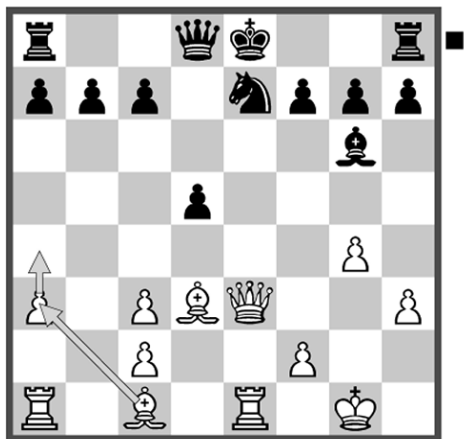
Recently GM Rapport won a nice game here against GM Bluebaum. This position is already quite tough for Black as they cannot easily evacuate their king from e8. Castling kingside is out of the question as White is always threatening mate on h7, whereas Black has to work hard in order to castle queenside. They will first have to solve the problem of the f7-pawn being left undefended.

**B)** 9...Ba5 Now that both bishops have kind of lost contact with the defense, we simply continue with active development. 10.Re1



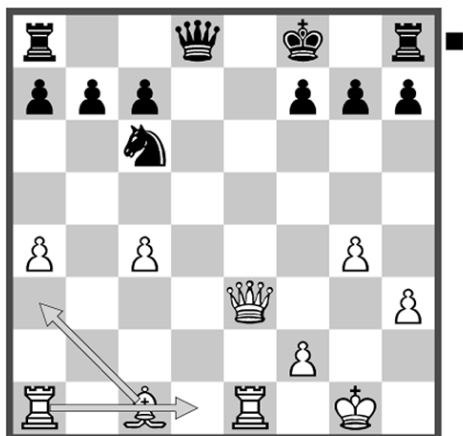
*Position after: 10.Re1*

It is especially important that the dark-squared bishop is not contributing to defense of the a3-f8 diagonal, notably the e7-square. 10...Nxd4 [Black cannot castle due to 10...0-0 11.Bxh7+ Kxh7 12.Ng5+ Kg6 13.g4!± when their king is severely exposed, and therefore they accept the challenge and capture on d4.] 11.g4 Nxf3+ 12.Qxf3 Bxc3 Everything is forced as retreating the bishop to g6 loses straight away. [12...Bg6 13.Bxg6 hxg6 14.b4! Bb6 15.Nxd5! brings White great material gains thanks to the fact that after 15...Qxd5 16.Qxd5+- the e7-knight is pinned!] 13.bxc3 Bg6 14.Qe3!



*Position after: 14.Qe3!*

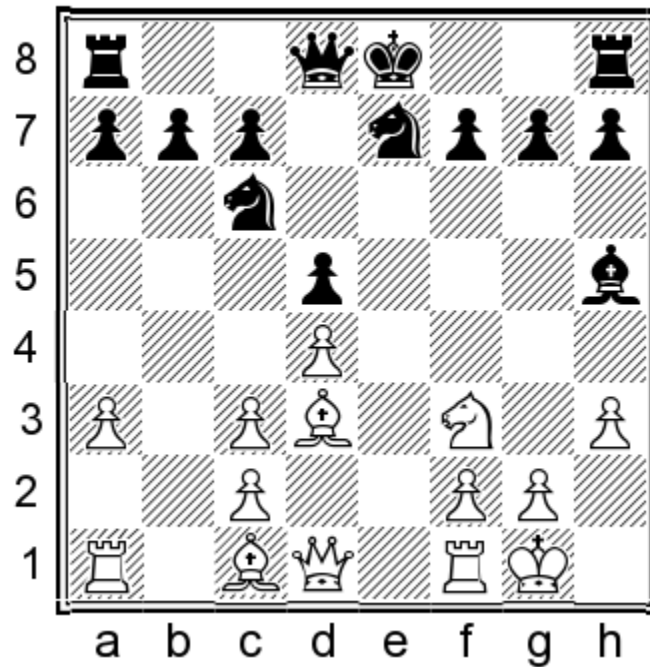
It is paramount that we stop the black king from running away from the center. We plan to increase the pressure on the dark squares with a4 and Ba3. 14...Kf8 15.a4 Bxd3 16.cxd3 Nc6 Black managed to avoid getting their knight pinned with Ba3 but we can alter our plans a little bit here. 17.c4! It makes a lot of sense to open the position more when we are attacking the enemy king. 17...dxc4 18.dxc4



*Position after: 18.dxc4*

with great compensation for White. We can decide whether we put the bishop on b2 or a3, then we will develop the a1-rook to the center with Rd1. Black has a very tough defensive task ahead, and let us just note that they cannot try to simplify with 18...Qd4? due to 19.Ba3+ Kg8 20.Qe8+!, with mate on the next move.

**10.bxc3**

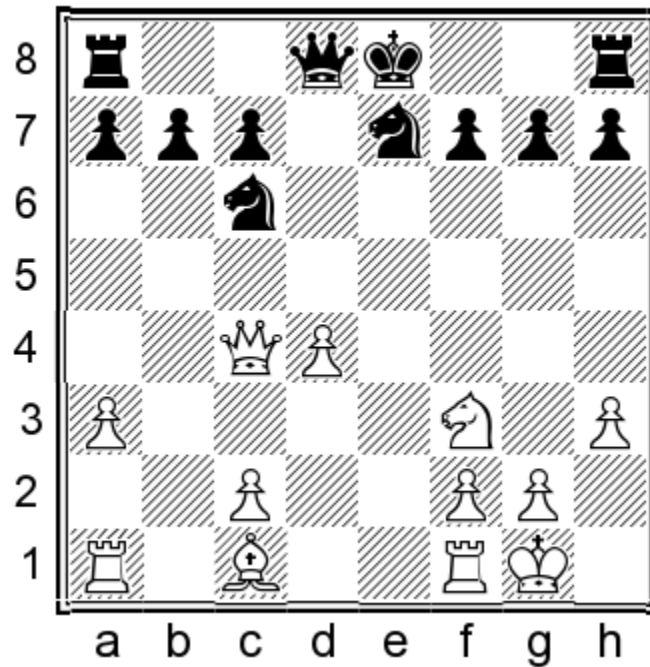


*Position after: 10.bxc3*

### **10...Qd7**

Black has to go for queenside castling which is good news for us as we will have nice chances for an attack on the flank.

**A)** 10...Bg6 is not very testing. The pressure on the center has been alleviated, so we can repair our pawn structure with 11.c4 Bxd3 12.Qxd3 dxc4 13.Qxc4

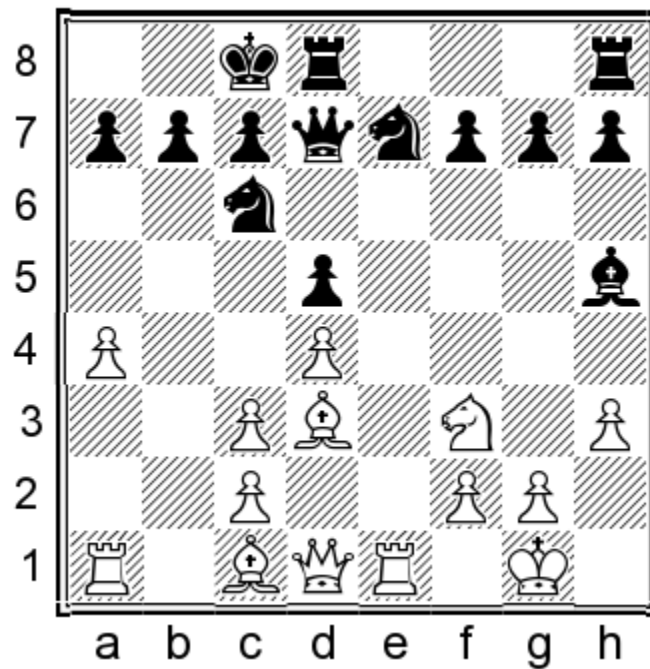


*Position after: 13.Qxc4*

and enjoy the stronger central position, for example 13...0-0 14.Bf4 Qd7 15.Qd3 Rfe8 16.Rad1 Rad8 17.c4<sup>2</sup>.

**B)** 10...0-0? Even if you accidentally started learning the French from this part of the book only, it should be a piece of cake for you to find the winning combination.

11.Bxh7+! Kxh7 12.Ng5+ Kg6 13.g4+- 11.a4 0-0-0 12.Re1



*Position after: 12.Re1*

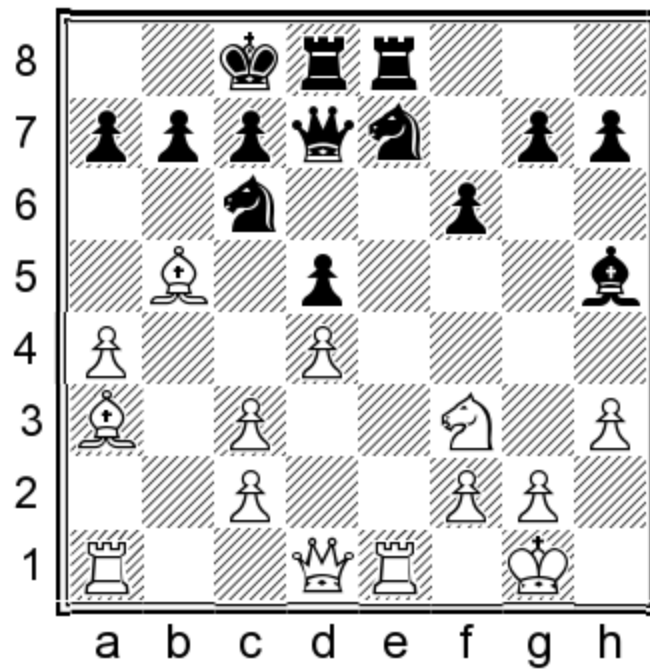
White's last two moves were interchangeable as both are equally important. One brings the rook to the open file, and the other opens a path for the c1-bishop.

### **12...Rde8!**

This is the most resilient set-up. Black can begin with ...a6 too, but any other defense immediately lands them in a bad position.

**A)** 12...f6?! does not stop White's main idea: 13.Bb5! Rhe8 [13...a6 does not slow down White's attack as they have 14.Ba3! when 14...axb5 15.axb5 regains the sacrificed piece while Black's king is dangerously exposed.] 14.Ba3

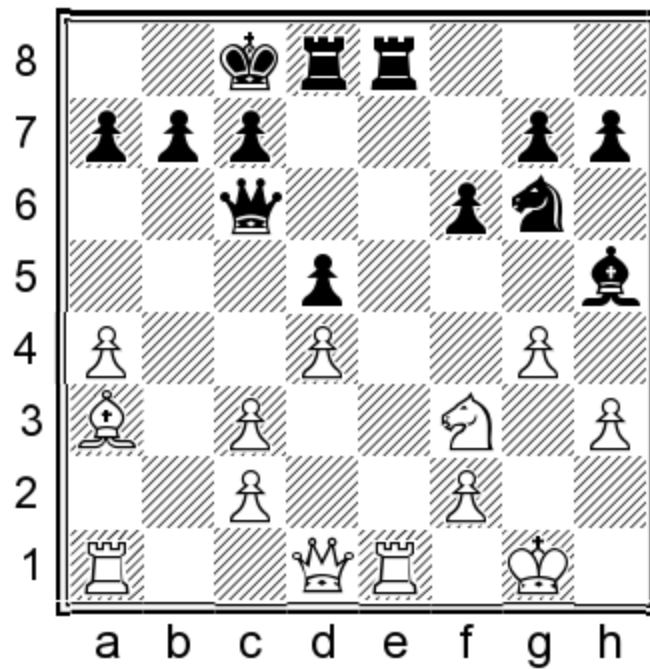




*Position after: 14.Ba3*

Now we already have a nasty threat and all of Black's attempts to force matters are simply not enough.

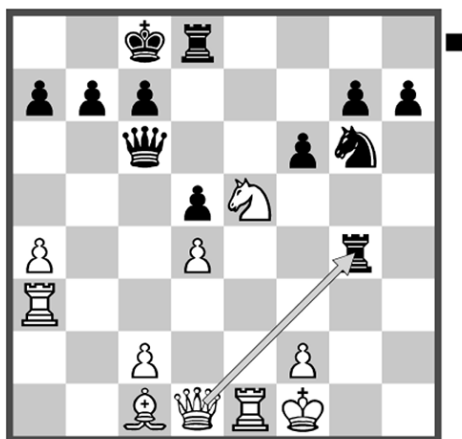
**A1)** It seems that 14...Ng6 15.Bxc6 Qxc6 16.g4



*Position after: 16.g4*

is immediately lost for Black but they will actually be able to collect some pawns for the asphyxiated bishop.

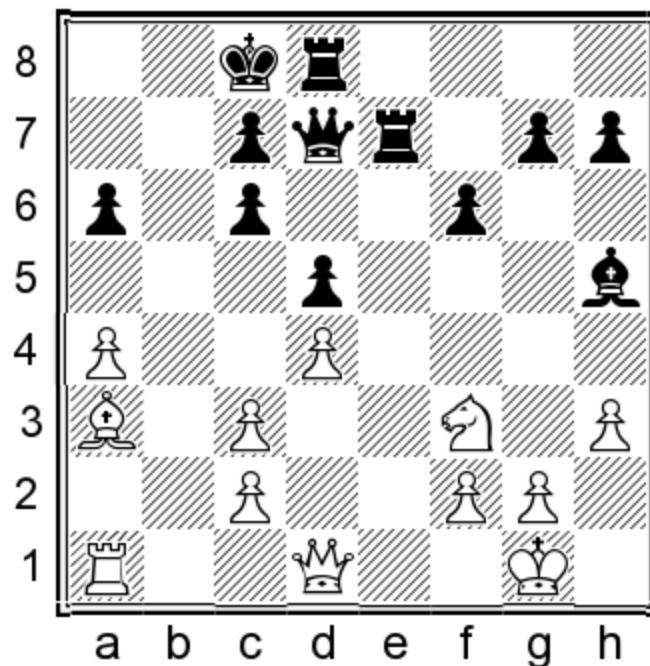
Nevertheless, the extra piece counts for more after 16...Bxg4 17.hxg4 Re4 18.Bc1! (bringing the bishop back to help the defense, specifically covering the f4-square) 18...Rxxg4+ 19.Kf1 Qxc3 20.Ra3 Qc6. After 21.Ne5!



*Position after: 21.Ne5!*

it turns out that White's pieces are much better coordinated. 21...Nxe5 [21...Qa6+ 22.Nd3 Rxd4 23.Qh5 White will regain one of Black's pawns soon, e.g. 23...Rh4 24.Qf5+ Kb8 25.Qxd5!<sup>2</sup>, utilizing the threat of backrank mate.] 22.dxe5 Rh4 23.Rg3<sup>2</sup> Black will still have to work a lot to prove their compensation.

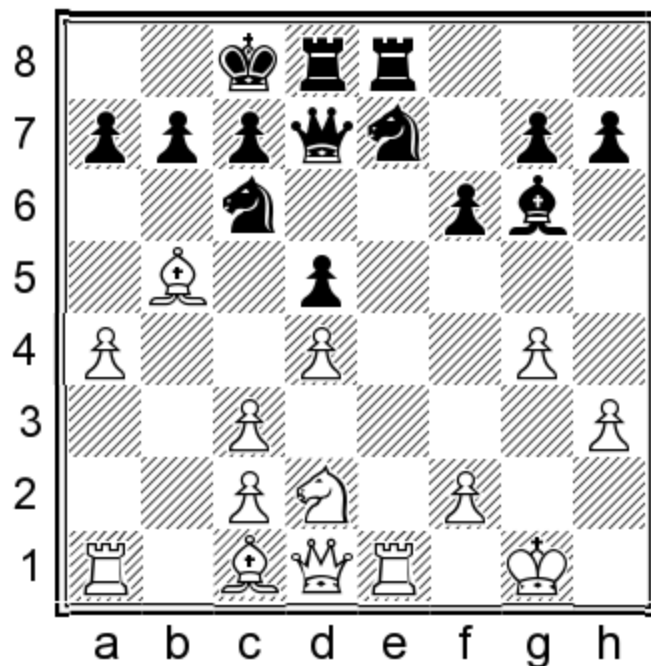
**A2)** 14...a6 15.Rxe7! They say that a threat is stronger than its execution, but the proof of the pudding is in the eating. 15...Rxe7 16.Bxc6 An important in-between move - Black is forced to ruin their structure. 16...bxc6



*Position after: 16...bxc6*

White is definitely much better after recapturing the rook immediately but they can do even better with 17.Qd3!, when the black king's escape route is blocked by its own rook on d8.

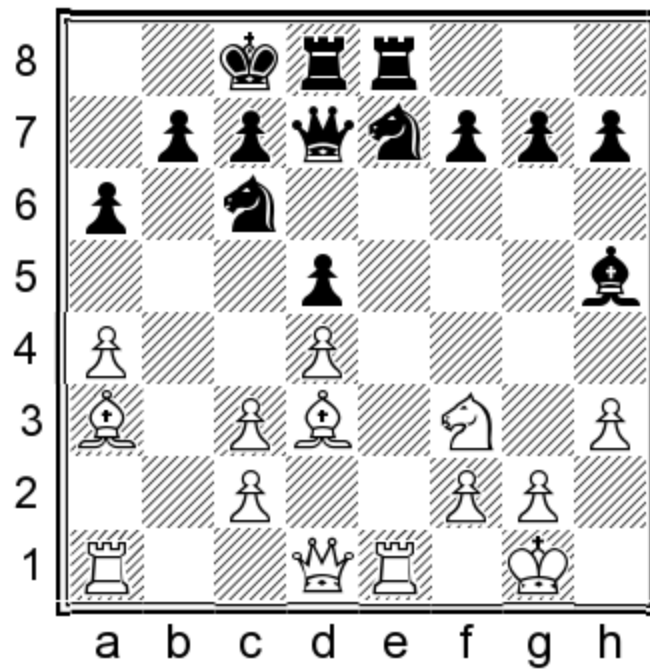
**B)** 12...Rhe8 is not good as Black is unable to get counterplay with ...h7-h5 after 13.g4! Bg6 14.Bb5, e.g. 14...f6 15.Nd2.



*Position after: 15.Nd2*

With ...Rde8 played instead, Black would get counter chances with ...h5, but now the rook is far away from the h-file. And, once again, 15...a6 does not stop the onslaught due to 16.Nb3! axb5 17.Nc5 Qd6 18.axb5 Nb8 19.Re6+-, trapping the queen.

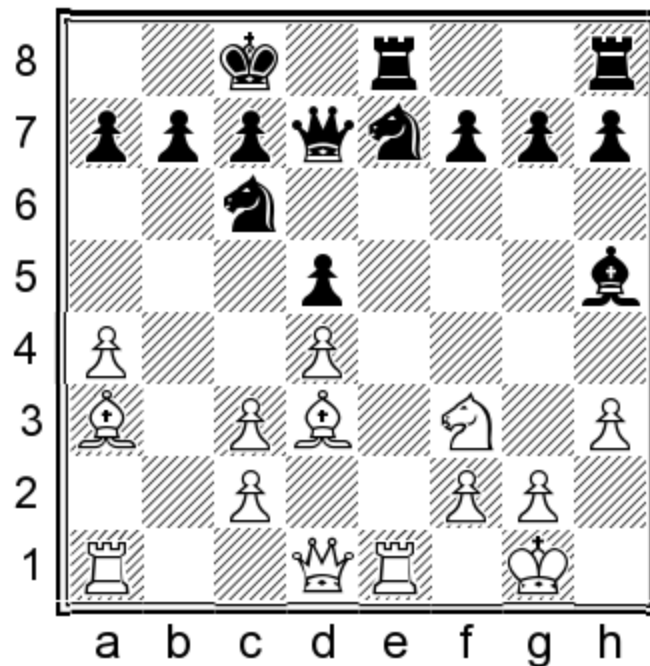
**C)** Finally 12...a6 13.Ba3 Rhe8? is an attempt to be overly clever and move-order us out of our favorable set-up.



*Position after: 13...Rhe8?*

But 14.g4! Bg6 15.Bxa6! is just crushing after 15...bxa6 16.Qe2 when it's either the a6-pawn and mate, or the e7-knight after 16...Nb8 17.Bxe7+-.

**13.Ba3**



*Position after: 13.Ba3*

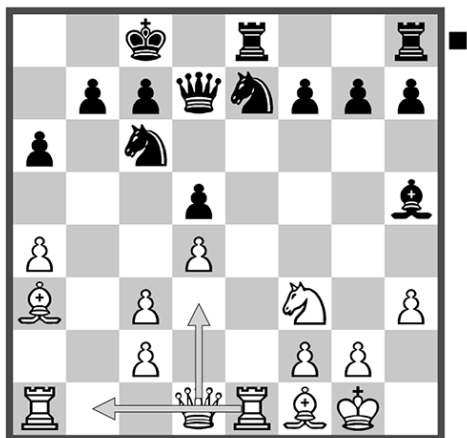
### **13...a6**

Black has sidestepped all of our opening traps, but the fight for the advantage continues. It will be a bit of a waiting game. Black cannot move the h5-bishop because of the quick Nd2-b3-c5 maneuver, and they cannot move the e7-knight away either because the h5-bishop would get in trouble. Therefore, their only logical plan is to prepare ...g5. We need to stay as flexible as possible.

13...f6 14.Bb5 a6 15.Rxe7! should already ring a bell!

15...Rxe7 16.Bxc6 bxc6 17.Bxe7± With the d8-square being vacant, we have to settle for only a big advantage instead of a decisive one. Not such a bad deal though.

### **14.Bf1**



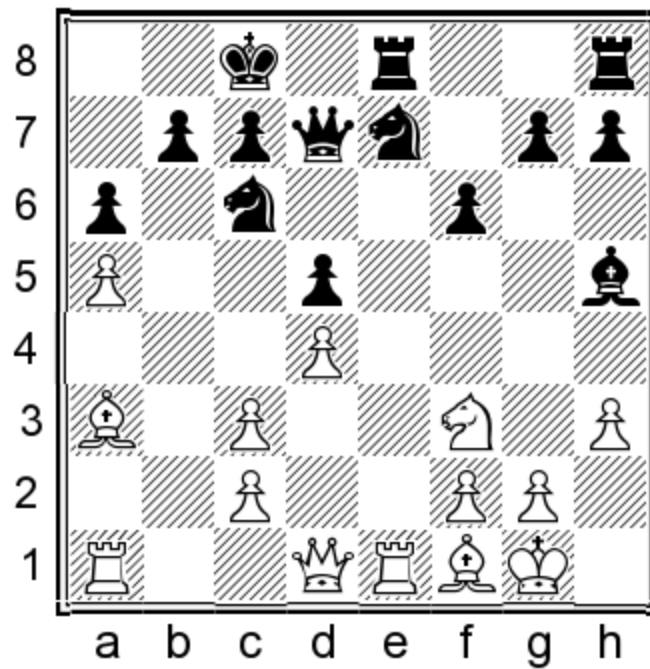
*Position after: 14.Bf1*

The bishop feels safer on f1 and it can also go to g2 after a subsequent g2-g3. If Black plays too lazily then we can also play Qd3, intending to bring the e1-rook to the queenside, or to execute the maneuver Nd2-b3-c5.

### **14...f6**

Taking the e5-square under control and preparing ...g5. Since the e5-square is well-protected Black is threatening to jump with ...Na5, therefore White's next move is pretty much forced.

### **15.a5**



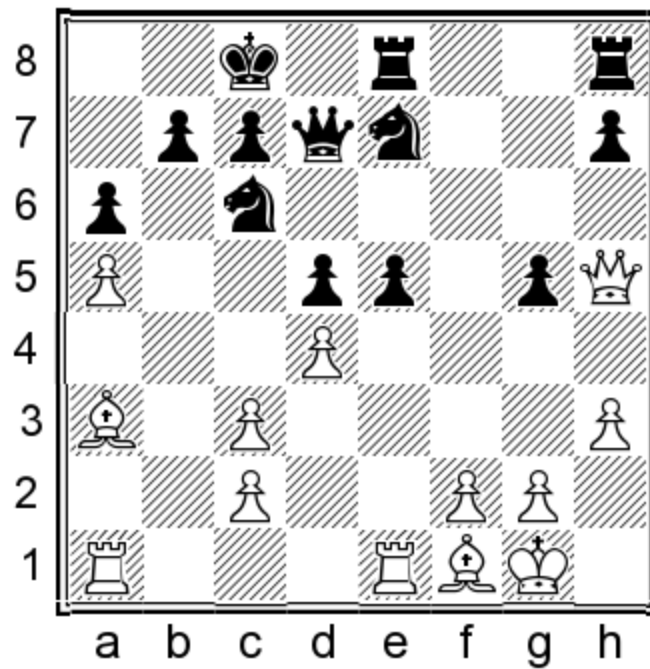
*Position after: 15.a5*

### **15...h6**

Another move preparing the kingside pawn expansion.

**A)** 15...g5 is not good yet due to a trick you'll be seeing a lot in this line. 16.Ne5! fxe5 [Exchanging the queens after 16...Bxd1 17.Nxd7 Kxd7 18.Rexd1<sup>2</sup> is not great because White will push c4 and enjoy a very pleasant ending.] 17.Qxh5

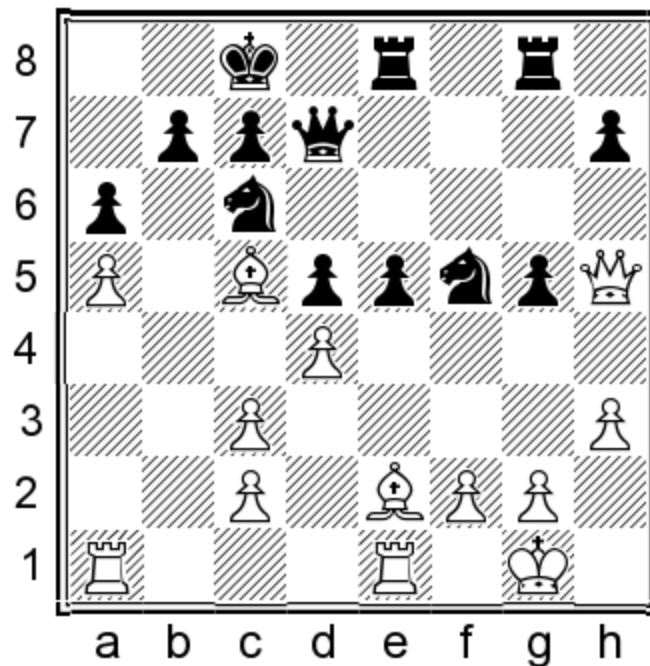




*Position after: 17.Qxh5*

Black would like to play both ...e4 and ...h6 at the same time, but fortunately it is still illegal to play two moves in a row 17...e4 18.Be2 Kb8 19.Qxg5±. Therefore, Black needs to prepare the ...g5 advance more carefully.

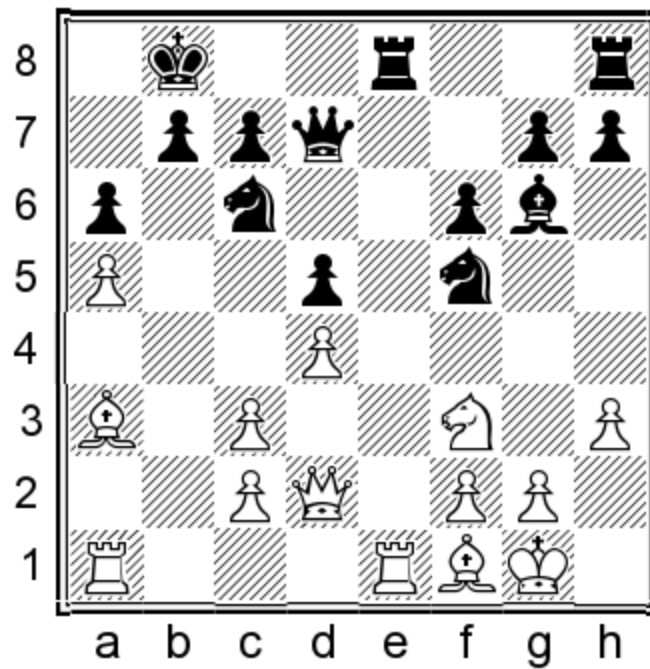
**B)** 15...Rhg8 is still not enough to prepare ...g5. The next reinforcing move on White's agenda is 16.Bc5 and 16...g5 is met by 17.Ne5! fxe5 18.Qxh5 Nf5 19.Be2



*Position after: 19.Be2*

with Bg4 to come on the next move. As already noted after 15...g5, Black needs both ...h6 and ...e4 as they'd like to keep the position closed, and 19...e4 20.Bg4 leaves them one tempo short of unpinning all of their pieces on the h3-c8 diagonal. After 20...Kb8 White brutally opens the position with 21.f4!±. With the move ...h6 included Black would be able to play ...Qh7, but in the current position they are simply doomed as a subsequent Rf1 will be decisive.

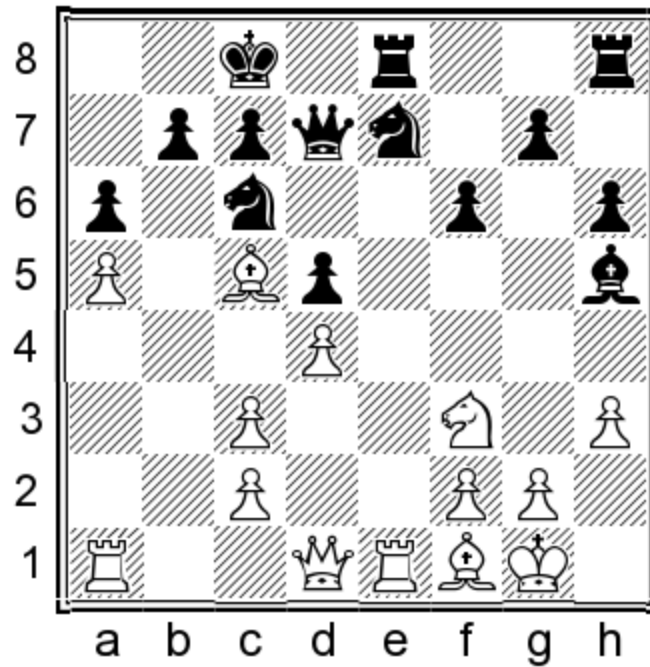
**C)** 15...Kb8 would be a nice example of lazy play: 16.Qd3 Bg6 17.Qd2 Nf5



*Position after: 17...Nf5*

18.Reb1! Ka8 19.Qc1! (preparing Nd2) 19...Rb8 20.Nd2<sup>2</sup>  
with very nice play on the queenside.

**16.Bc5**

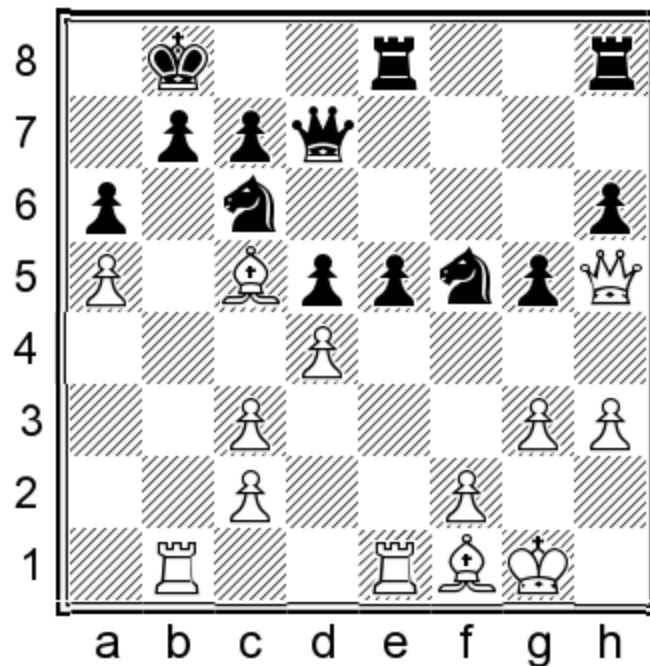


*Position after: 16.Bc5*

Since Black hasn't lost any time so far, we make the most flexible move possible. The bishop feels very comfortable on c5. If Black insists on playing ...g5, we continue with g3, neutralizing further pawn advances on that wing.

### **16...Rhg8**

16...g5 17.g3 Kb8 is a bit of a lazy hybrid and does not go well with ...g5. 18.Ne5! As a rule, if we have g3 and ...Kb8, we can justify the knight jump. 18...fxe5 19.Qxh5 Nf5 20.Rab1!

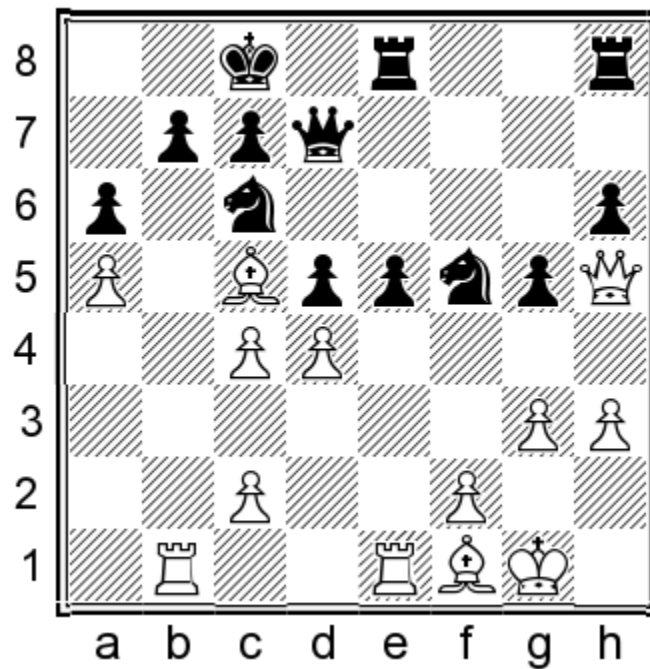


*Position after: 20.Rab1!*

This is the issue – Black has to lose more time with the king while White’s rook becomes very active on the b-file.

**A)** 20...Ka8 Black’s king is not protecting the d7-queen and Black once again cannot hold everything together. If they close the position with ...e4, then White will undermine their center with c4. It is difficult to expel the white queen with ...h5 either, because g5 will be hanging. 21.Qg4<sup>2</sup>

**B)** 20...Kc8 21.c4! Another rule of thumb can be that ...Kb8-Kc8 is met with c4.

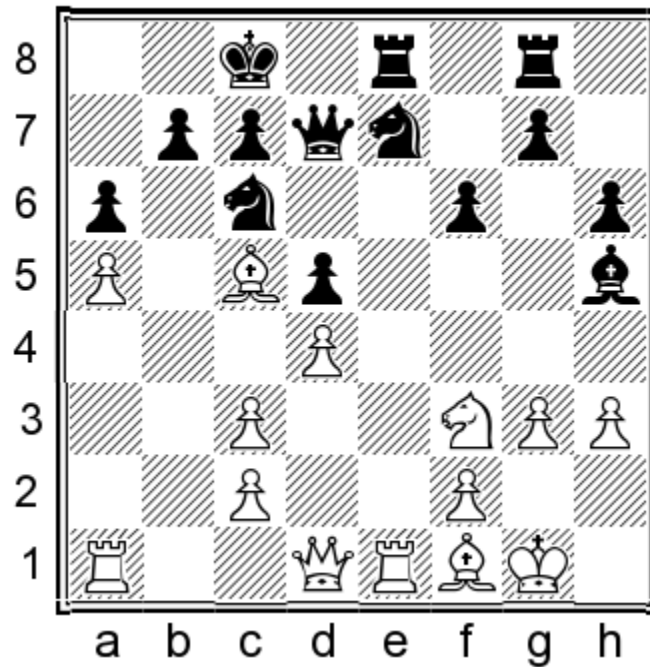


*Position after: 21.c4!*

**B1)** 21...Nfxd4 This can be compared with the line 16...Rhg8 17.g3 Kb8 where Black does not commit to ...g5 and White's queen feels less safe. Thanks to the queen having a stable position, 22.Red1!, threatening c3, is simply crushing, although capturing on d5 is not bad either.

**B2)** 21...exd4 22.Rxe8+ Qxe8 23.Qg4 Qe4 24.Bd3 Qxg4 25.hxg4 Nfe7 26.cxd5 Nxd5 27.Kg2<sup>2</sup> After Rh1 White will collect some material back and their kingside pawns, supported by the bishop pair, will be very strong.

**17.g3**



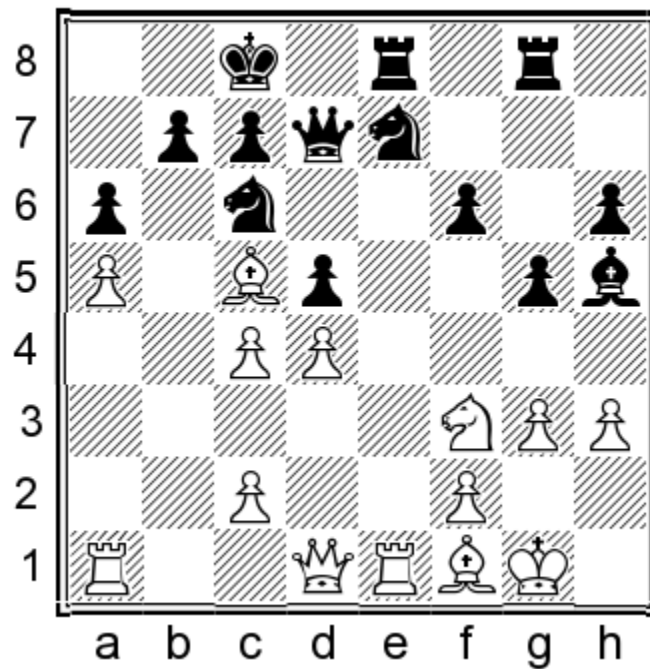
*Position after: 17.g3*

In theory, if Black makes a void move, we can continue with Bg2 and Qb1, intending Nd2-b3-c5. As it is unlikely your opponent will choose something like 17... Rh8 though, let's consider some sensible moves instead.

### **17...Kb8**

**A)** 17...Bf7 This is a concession, giving White enough time to reorganize their army. 18.Qb1 White will continue with Qb2 and Reb1, possibly maneuvering the knight to c5 via d2-b3.

**B)** 17...g5 18.c4! is problematic for Black as well.



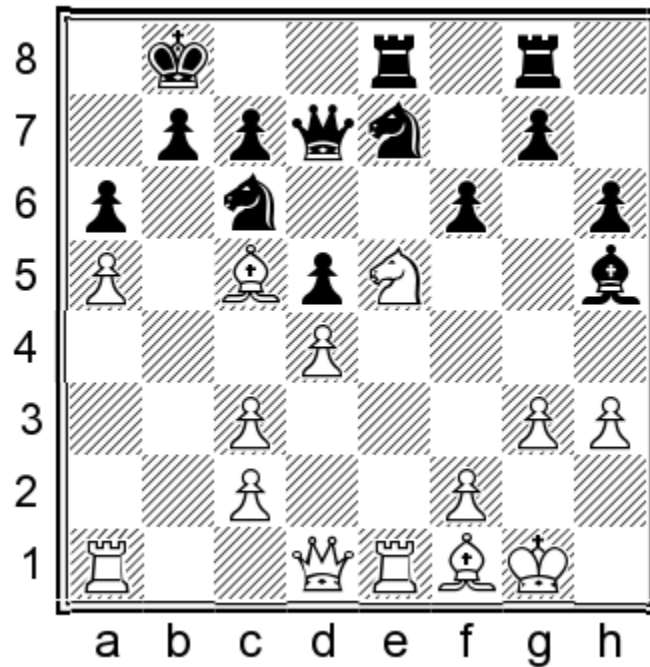
*Position after: 18.c4!*

**B1)** The main point is that 18...dxc4 19.Ne5! leaves the position too open, and White will gain a tempo by hitting the rook with Bxc4. You might ask why it was not possible to play this combination one move sooner – the thing is that after 19...Bxd1 20.Nxd7 White's knight is not trapped anymore as the f6-pawn is unprotected. 20...Kxd7 21.Rexd1±

**B2)** 18...f5 19.Ra3± White is toying with the idea of doubling rooks on the e-file, and we reinforce our favorite threat of Ne5.

## 18.Ne5!



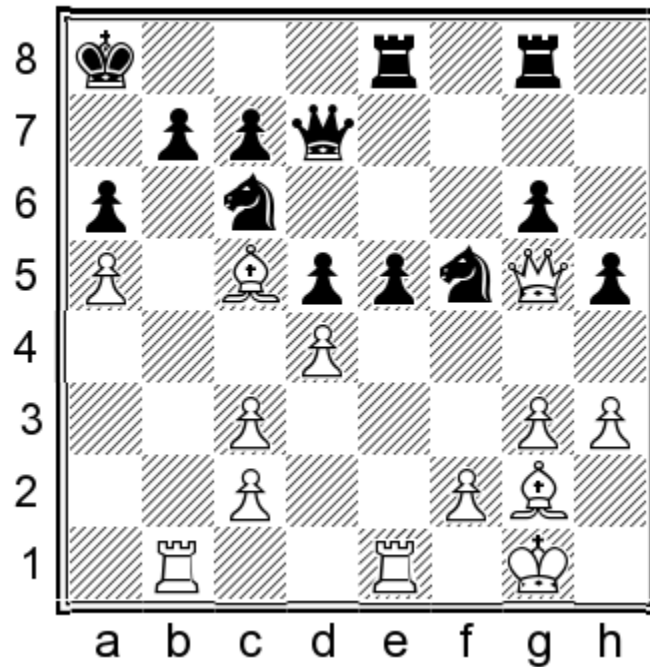


*Position after: 18.Ne5!*

Remember the rule of thumb?

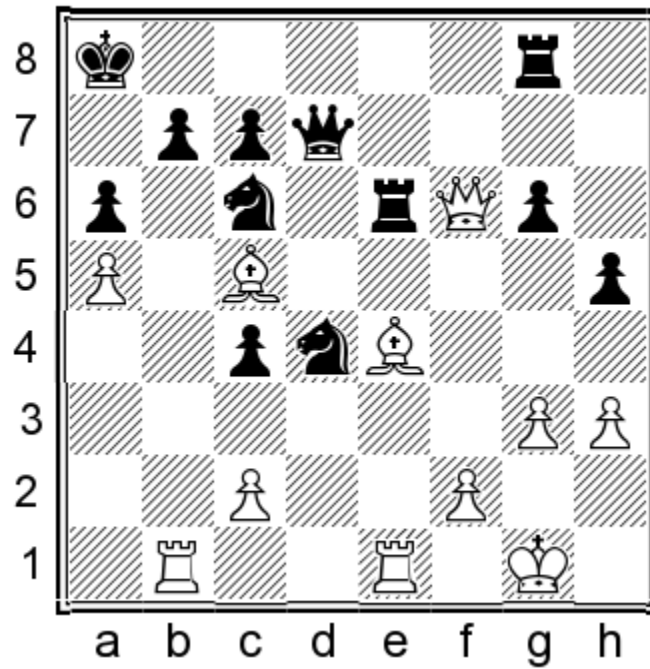
**18...fxe5 19.Qxh5 Nf5 20.Rab1! Kc8**

20...Ka8 21.Bg2! The king is not as safe as it seems on a8. After 20...Kc8 the idea is not working so well for White for reasons that will soon become clear. 21...g6 22.Qg4 h5 23.Qg5



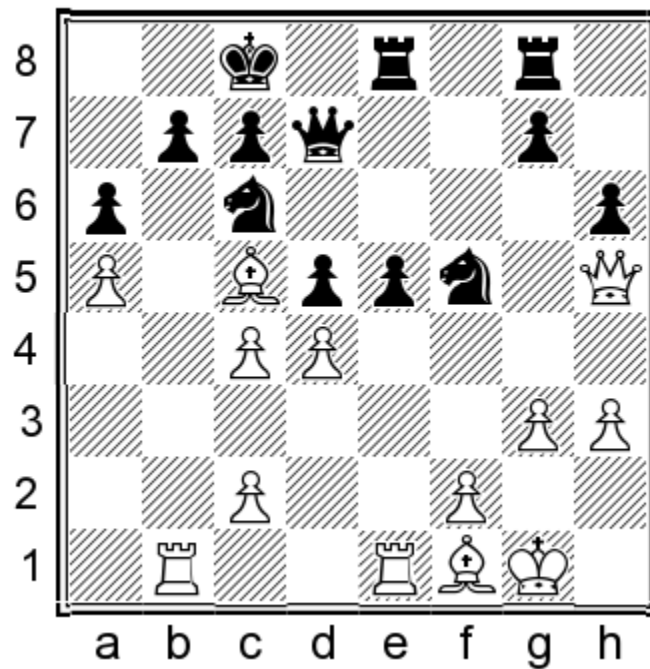
*Position after: 23.Qg5*

It was not so easy to find a good square for the queen this time, but there are only so many pawn moves for Black.  
 23...e4 24.c4 dxc4 25.Bxe4 Nfxd4 26.Qf6! The reason why this move doesn't work against ...Kc8 is simply ingenious.  
 26...Re6



*Position after: 26...Re6*

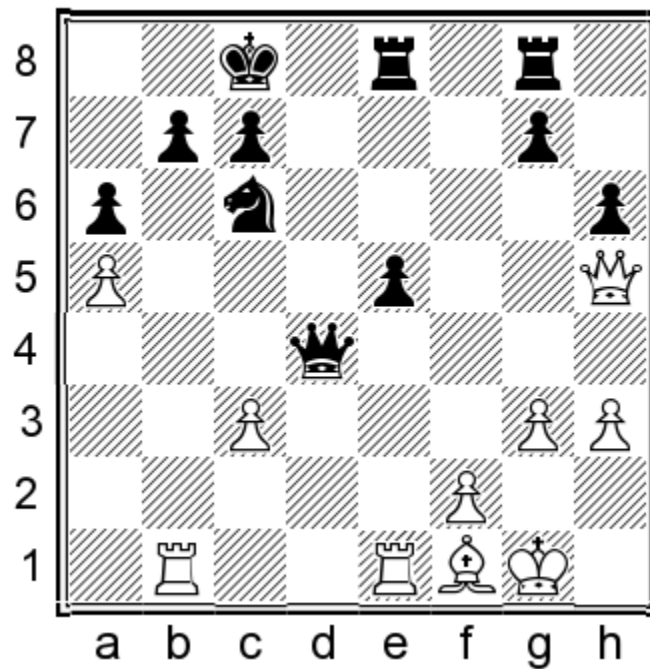
27.Qxd4!! Suddenly Black is losing material. 27...Nxd4  
 28.Bxb7+ Had the king been on c8, it would escape to d8.  
 But not this time. 28...Kb8 29.Bc6++- 21.c4



*Position after: 21.c4*

**21...g6**

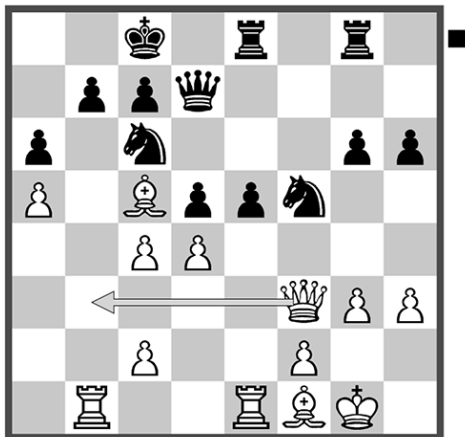
21...Nfxd4 22.cxd5 Qxd5 23.Bxd4 Black would like to recapture with a pawn but the pin along the 5th rank prevents them from doing so. 23...Qxd4 24.c3!



*Position after: 24.c3!*

Pushing the queen away from the center. Taking the pawn would be tantamount to suicide after Rec1, but even after 24...Qd7 25.Qe2!+-, already threatening to capture on b7, Black can hardly resist the light-squared attack for too long.

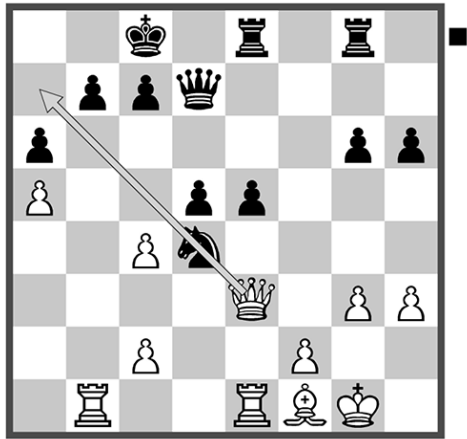
**22.Qf3!**



*Position after: 22.Qf3!*

The idea is simple – Qf3-b3xb7 and mate.

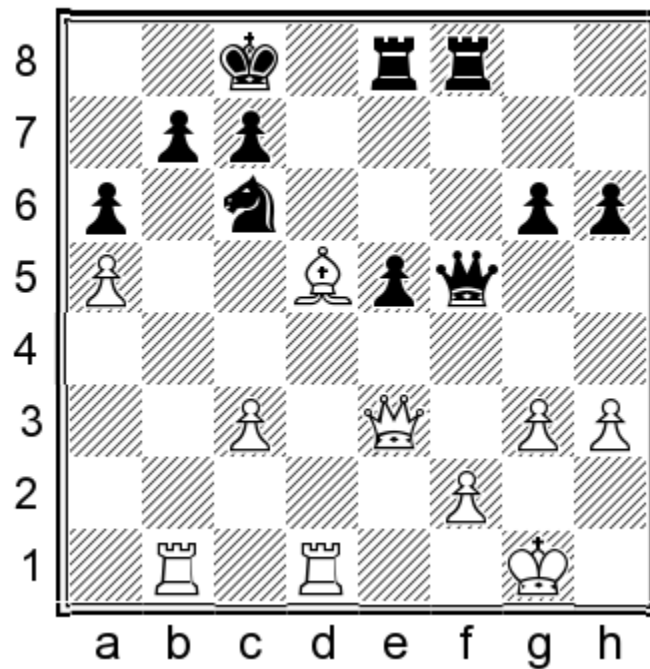
**22...Nfxd4 23.Bxd4 Nxd4 24.Qe3**



*Position after: 24.Qe3*

If the d4-knight makes a wrong move, White's queen is prepared to penetrate the enemy ranks from a7 instead. After 24...dxc4 25.c3

(pushing the knight away from f3) 25...Nc6 26.Bxc4 Rgf8 27.Red1 Qf5 28.Bd5±

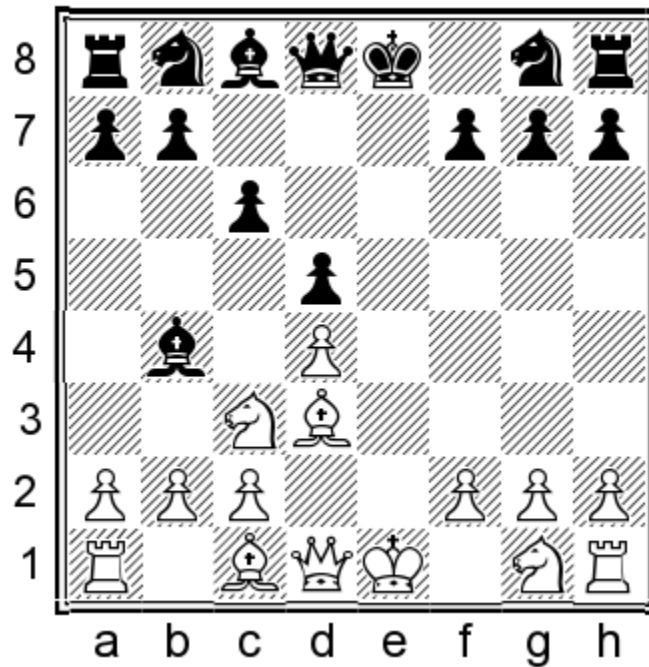


*Position after: 28.Bd5±*

White has more than enough compensation for the pawn and I would be surprised if Black made it until the time control.

**c) 5...c6 6.Qf3 Nf6 7.Bg5 Be7**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3 c6**



*Position after: 5...c6*

The choice of GM Rapport at the Prague Chess Masters. I consider this the toughest nut to crack.

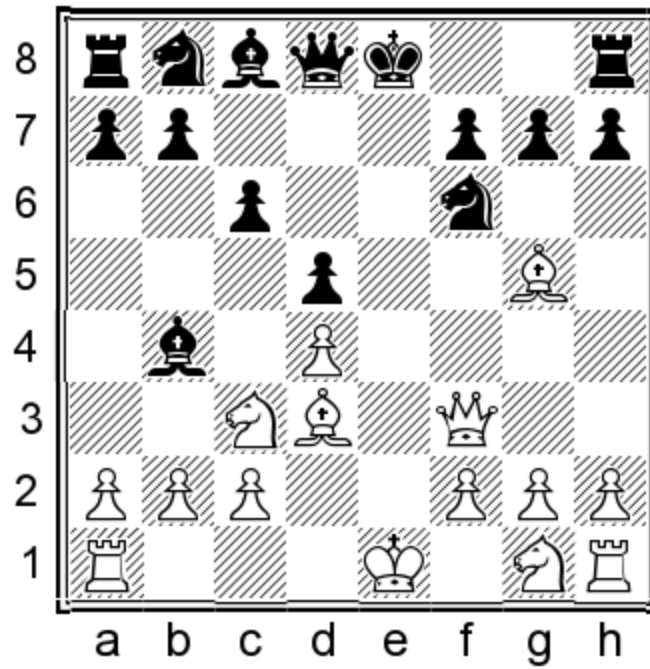
### **6.Qf3**

This line tends to be the liveliest of all the systems after 3...Bb4 that we have considered so far. We aim for quick development with Nge2, Bf4/g5 and castling queenside. This set-up works only after 5...c6 because it will still take some time for Black to harass the slightly exposed queen and the c6-square is unavailable for the b8-knight, so it cannot make use of the indirect weakening of the d4-square.

### **6...Nf6 7.Bg5**

Starting to put pressure on Black immediately.



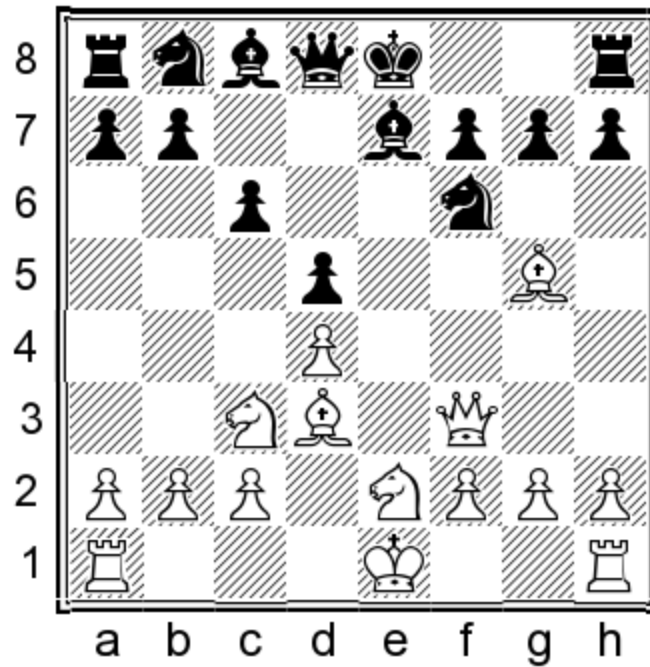


*Position after: 7.Bg5*

**7...Be7**

This is more restrained but the ...Bb4-e7 maneuver certainly feels like a loss of time.

**8.Nge2**

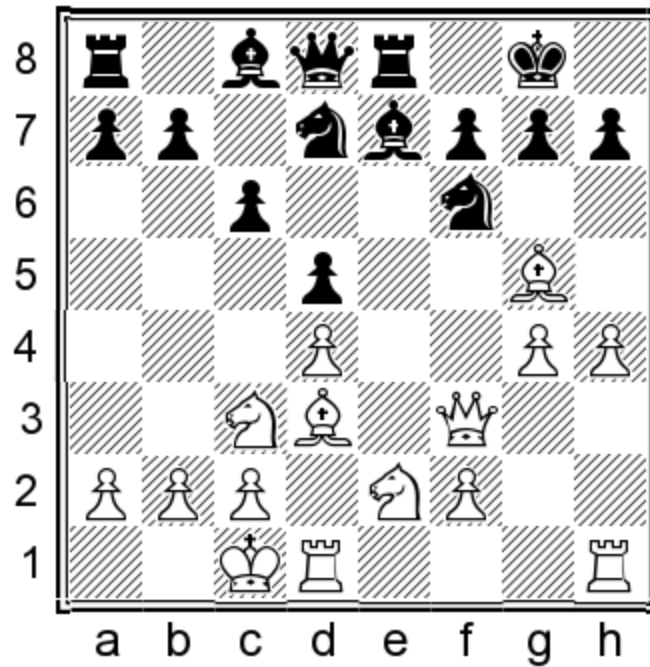


*Position after: 8.Nge2*

### **8...0-0**

**A)** 8...Nbd7 9.0-0-0 0-0 10.h4 This is an even better version of our plan from the 8...0-0 line as the c8-bishop is blocked in by the d7-knight.

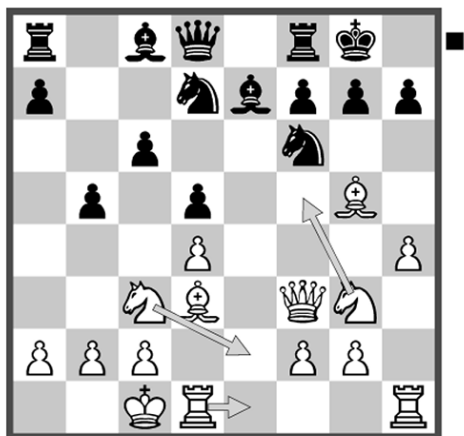
**A1)** 10...Re8 11.g4!



*Position after: 11.g4!*

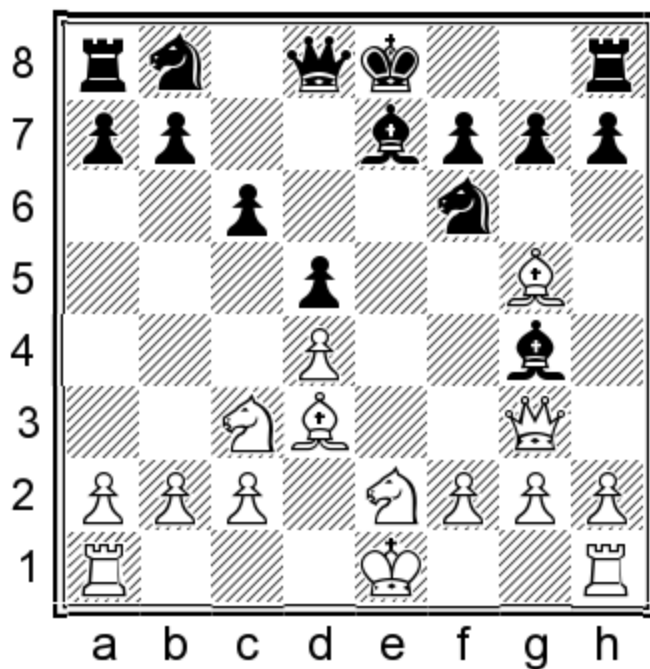
With the black light-squared bishop's path being obstructed, there is nothing stopping us from pushing the pawn forward. 11...b5 12.Ng3 Nb6 13.Bxf6 Bxf6 14.g5 with an easy game for White as 14...Bxd4 does not win a pawn due to 15.Bxh7+! Kxh7 16.Rxd4.

**A2)** 10...b5 11.Ng3! In comparison with the setup without ...Nbd7 we get an even nicer square for the c3-knight in the case of ...b4, as it has a great spot on e2. We will further increase the pressure with Nf5 and Rde1.



*Position after: 11.Ng3!*

**B)** 8...Bg4 does not make much sense here as after 9.Qg3

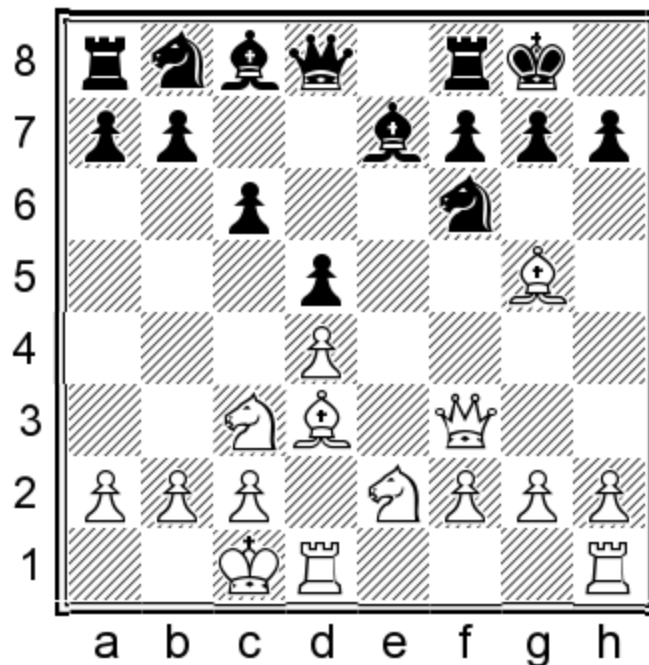


*Position after: 9.Qg3*

Black will have to give up the bishop pair advantage with 9...Bxe2 [9...Bd6 immediately loses a piece to 10.Bxf6!

Bxg3 11.Bxd8+-.] 10.Nxe2, which obviously benefits White.

## 9.0-0-0



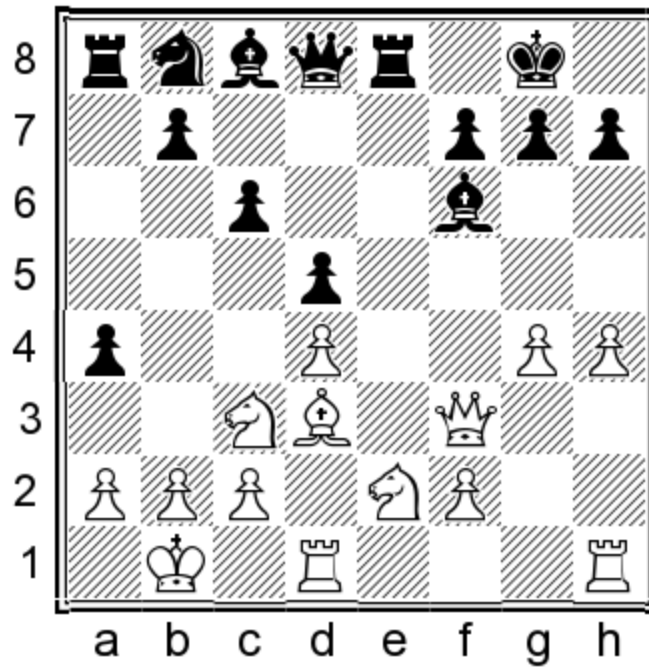
*Position after: 9.0-0-0*

Our plan here is rather simple: if Black just sits and does nothing, we advance with h4 and prepare the g4 push.

## 9...b5

**A)** 9...h6 10.h4! is a typical motif. After 10...b5 11.Rde1 we transpose to the position analyzed via the move order 9...b5 10.Rde1 h6.

**B)** 9...Re8 10.h4 a5 11.Kb1 could be an example of what happens when Black just treads water. 11...a4 12.Bxf6 Bxf6 13.g4!



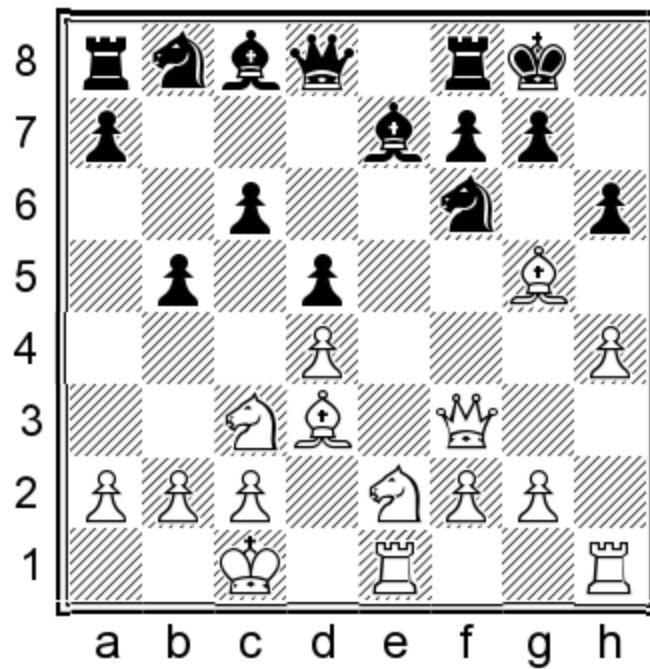
*Position after: 13.g4!*

Everything is ready for this pawn advance. If Black lets the g-pawn advance to g5 then they will obviously come under heavy fire. However, taking on h4 looks (and is!) extremely dangerous as 13...Bxh4? runs into 14.Bxh7+! (to be frank, simply moving the g-pawn forward was winning too, but this is too pretty not to go for) 14...Kxh7 15.Qxf7 Re6 16.g5! Qxg5 17.Rdg1+- and Black's position just collapses. It should be noted that it is quite useful to include Kb1 here as there will never be any checks on g5.

## **10.Rde1!**

We need the d1-square for our c3-knight in case of ...b4.

## **10...h6 11.h4!**

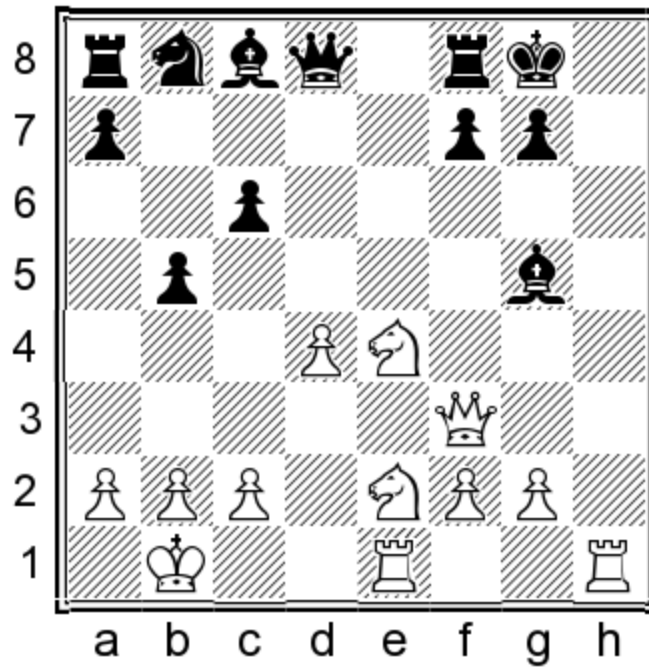


*Position after: 11.h4!*

Again, we see this typical idea. Taking the piece on g5 comes at a great cost for Black as the h-file would open and their king would suddenly be under a lot of pressure.

**11...b4**

11...hxg5 12.hxg5 Ne4 13.Bxe4 dxe4 14.Nxe4! Bxg5+  
15.Kb1



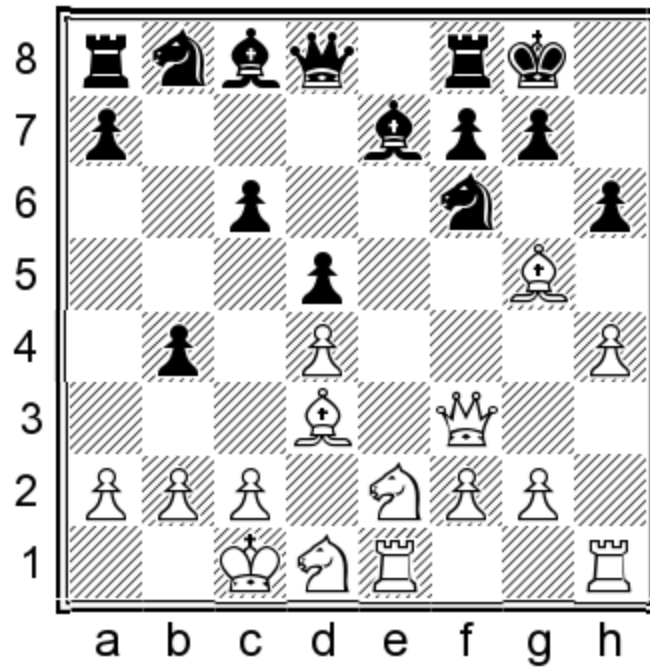
*Position after: 15.Kb1*

is already simply busted for Black. White has only a pawn for the sacrificed bishop but their attack is irresistible.

15...Re8 [15...Bh6 16.Rxh6! is rather obvious but still very pretty. 16...gxh6 17.Qg3+ Kh7 18.Rh1 White has the terrible threat of Ng5 and after 18...Rg8 19.Qf4+- comes, hitting both h6 and f7.] 16.N2g3!+- White just slowly comes forward with Nf5, or Rh5 and Reh1 and there is nothing Black can do since their whole queenside is still sleeping. On ...Bh6 the Rxh6 trick is always there.

**12.Nd1!**





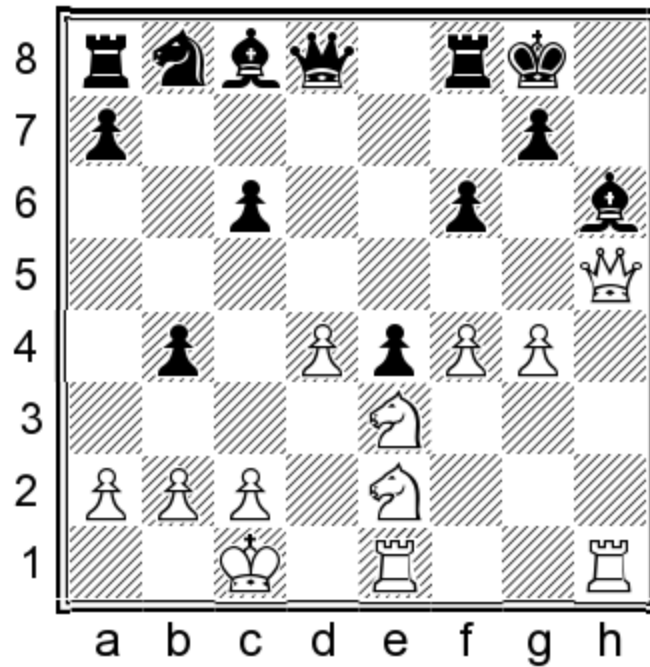
*Position after: 12.Nd1!*

Once White's knight gets to e3, the g4-advance will be unstoppable so it is imperative that Black captures 12...hxg5 13.hxg5

but even now White obtains great compensation.

**13...Ne4 14.Qh5 Bxg5+ 15.f4 Bh6 16.Bxe4 dxe4 17.g4 f6 18.Ne3!**

This is the key move, taking the f5-square under control. Black is unable to stop the g-pawn which will inevitably move forward after the preparatory Reg1.

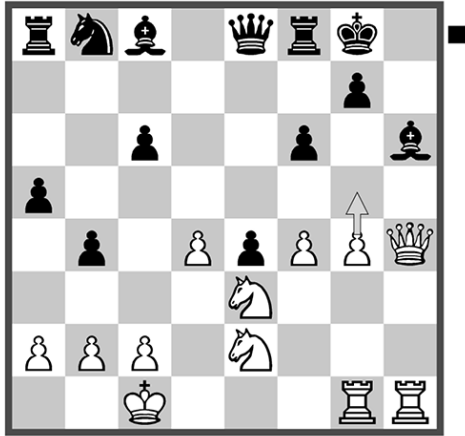


*Position after: 18.Ne3!*

**18...a5**

18...Qe8 allows the immediate push 19.g5 [19.Qh4 Qd8 20.Reg1 Ba6 might become a little unclear.] 19...Qxh5 20.Rxh5± and White retrieves the sacrificed piece and keeps the attack going even into an endgame, while 18...Ba6 19.Nf5!+- is just bad as Black will get checkmated after Nxh6.

**19.Reg1 Qe8 20.Qh4!**

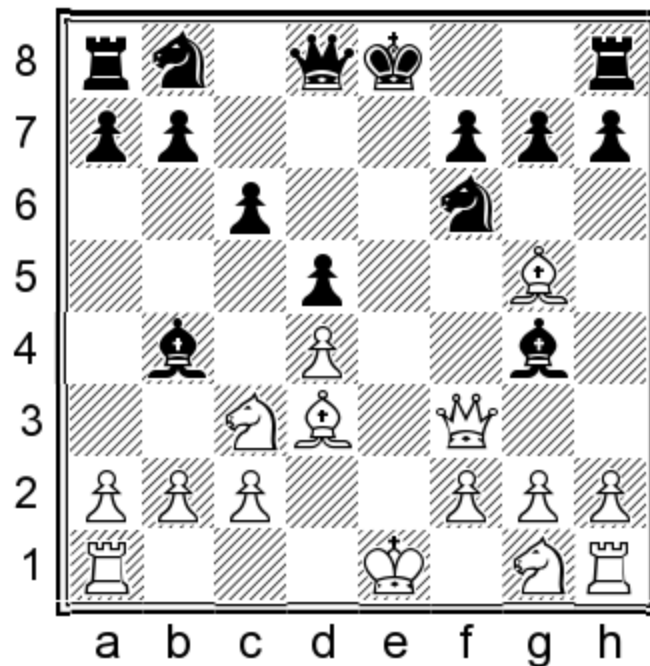


*Position after: 20.Qh4!*

With the rook already sitting on g1, White should definitely keep queens on as they will simply crush their opponent after g4-g5.

**d) 5...c6 6.Qf3 Nf6 7.Bg5 Bg4**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3 c6 6.Qf3 Nf6 7.Bg5 Bg4**



*Position after: 7...Bg4*

Developing the knight to d7 is a little awkward with the bishop stuck on c8, so Black tries to get it out first.

**8.Qe3+**

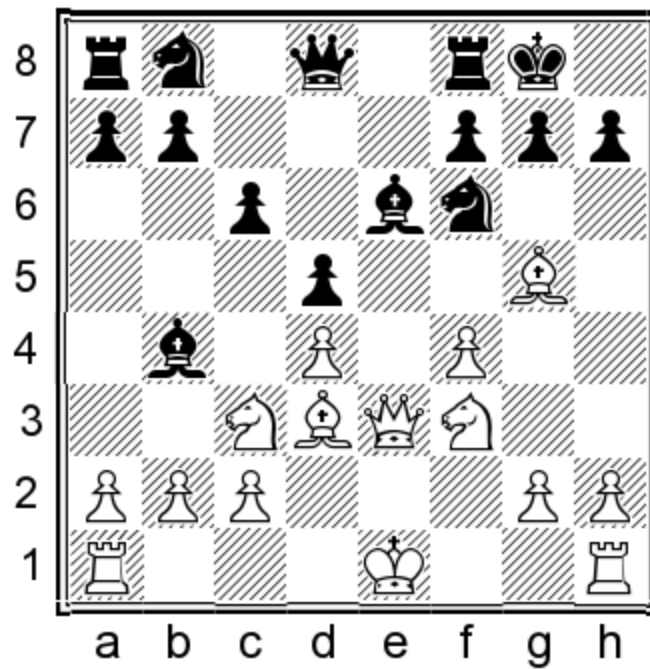
We would like to damage Black's pawn structure should they play ...Qe7 or ...Be7, and therefore they are forced to move the g4-bishop again.

**8...Be6 9.f4!**

With the simple threat of f5.

**9...0-0 10.Nf3**

After White castles they will be in full control, so naturally Black tries to counter with an immediate strike in the center.

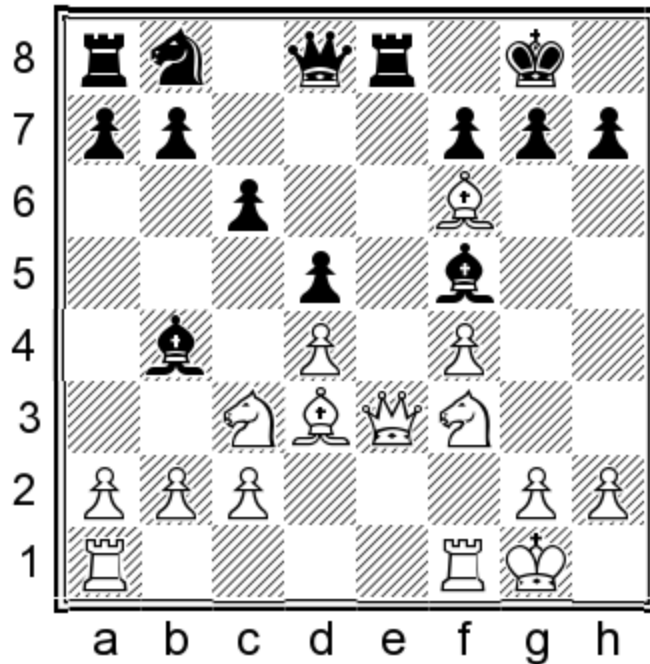


*Position after: 10.Nf3*

**10...c5**

10...Re8 11.0-0 Now the only thing White needs to do is to play Ne5 (or remove the queen from the e-file so that there are no discovered attacks from the e8-rook). Note that

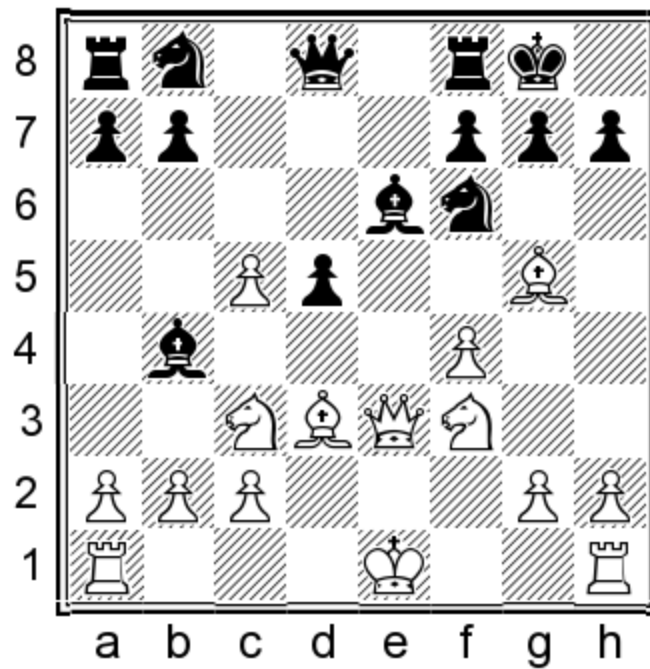
11...Bf5 fails to the in-between move 12.Bxf6!±,



*Position after: 12.Bxf6!±*

which destroys Black's pawn structure and weakens their king.

**11.dxc5**

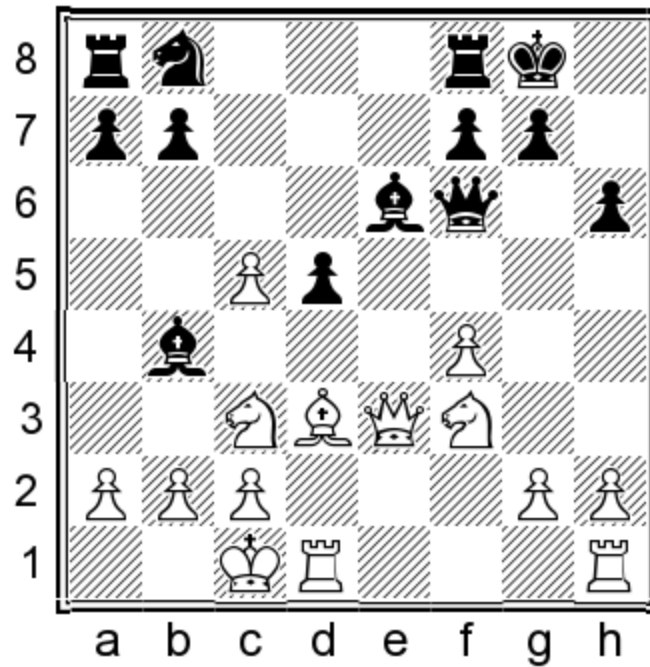


*Position after: 11.dxc5*

Unfortunately, White's hands will get a little dirty in this line, but eventually they will emerge with the better position.

**11...Nbd7**

11...h6 is not so demanding. We simply finish development with 12.Bxf6 Qxf6 13.0-0-0.

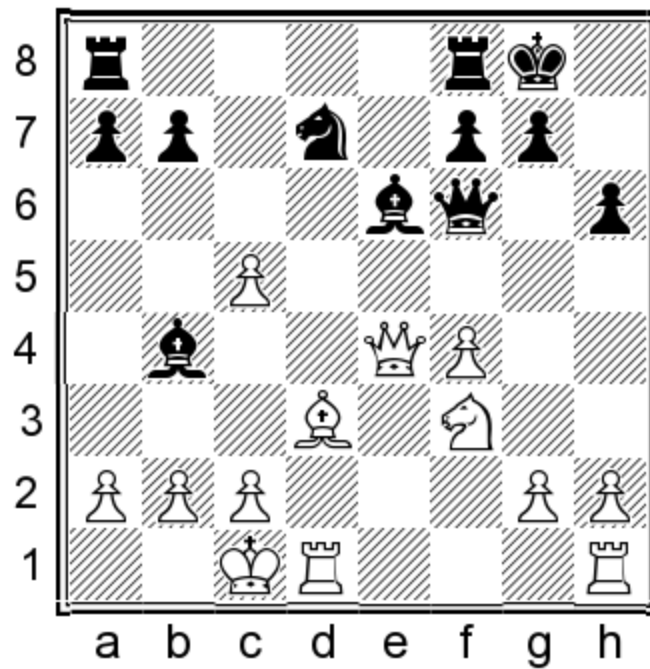


*Position after: 13.0-0-0*

Surprisingly, White does not mind Black capturing on c3 and damaging their structure as without the dark-squared bishop Black's counterattack would run out of steam.

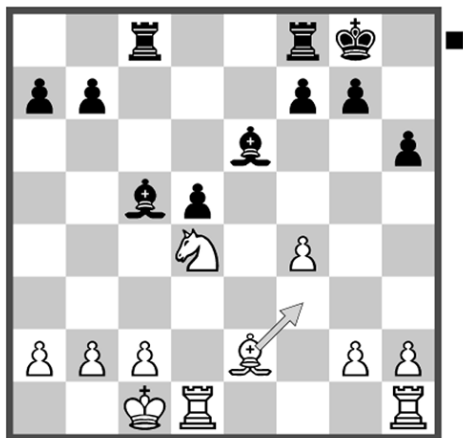
13...Nd7 [13...Bxc3 14.bxc3 should be good for White. After all, they do have an extra pawn and the e6-bishop is rather passive. Note that 14...Qxc3?? loses the queen to 15.Bh7++-.] 14.Na4 [It's true that 14.Ne4 dxe4 15.Qxe4





*Position after: 15.Qxe4*

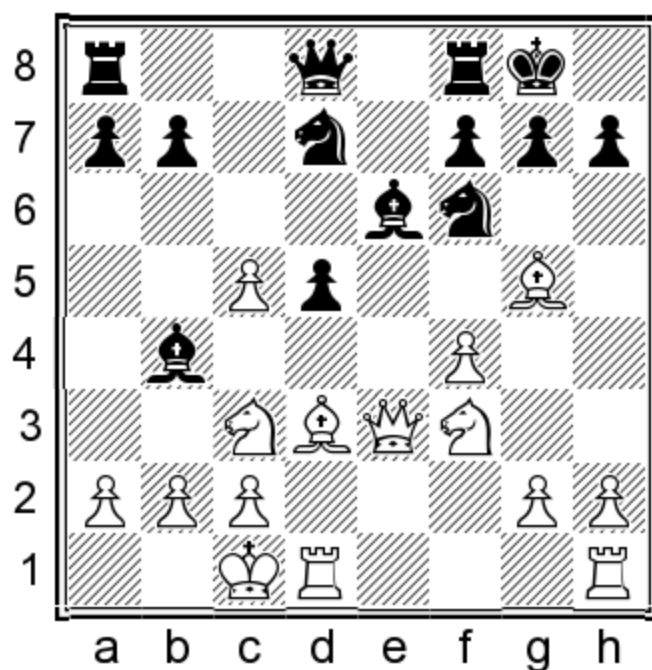
wins a pawn thanks to the double attack on b4 and h7, but it is risky to take it as Black will have counterattacking chances on the queenside after 15...Rfc8 16.Qxb4 Nxc5.] 14...Rac8 15.Qd4! Now White will force a better endgame. 15...Qxd4 16.Nxd4 Nxc5 17.Nxc5 Bxc5 18.Be2!



*Position after: 18.Be2!*

An important move, rerouting the bishop to the f3-square to attack the d5-pawn. As Bent Larsen once said, the correct way to play against an isolated pawn is to attack it and turn it into an extra pawn in your pocket. 18...Rfe8 19.Bf3 g6 20.Rd3 Kg7 21.c3 White has a nice pawn structure and Black will have to suffer quite a bit due to the d5-pawn.

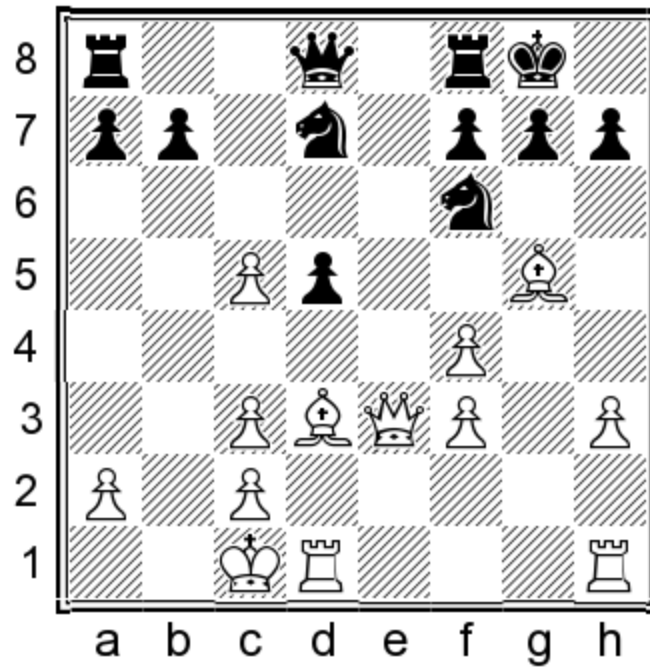
## 12.0-0-0



*Position after: 12.0-0-0*

## 12...Qa5

12...Bxc3 13.bxc3 Bg4 14.h3 Bxf3 15.gxf3

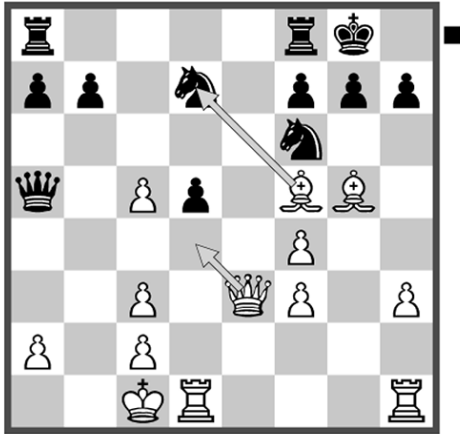


*Position after: 15.gxf3*

This position is a rather unusual sight. Besides keeping the c5-pawn covered by the queen there are other merits to this capture. The point is to protect the e4-square against a possible enemy knight intrusion, and to open the g-file for White's rook.

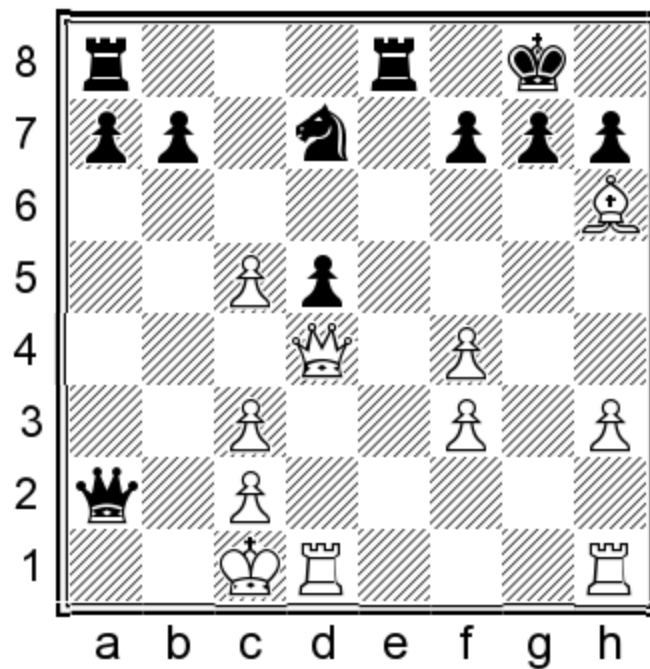
**A)** 15...Rc8 16.Rhg1 is also unpleasant for Black, threatening the simple Bh6 [16.Bf5 is possible here too although it is not so strong with the queen still present on d8], and after 16...Re8 17.Qd4 Black's issues with the dark-squares persist.

**B)** 15...Qa5 16.Bf5!



*Position after: 16.Bf5!*

White's pieces are exerting a lot of pressure and Black has to be extremely careful, e.g. 16...Qxa2 17.Qd4 [17.Rhg1? Rfe8 18.Qd4 Re2! gives Black too much active play.] 17...Rfe8 18.Bxd7 Nxd7 [18...Re2 19.Qa4!+- is an only move, but at least it is clearly winning.] 19.Bh6!.



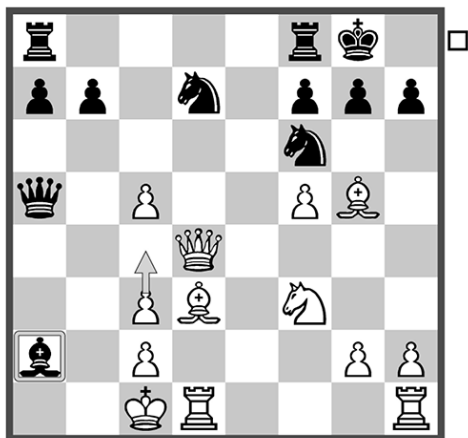
*Position after: 19.Bh6!*

The point being 19...gxh6 20.Rhg1+ Kf8 21.Qh8+ Ke7 22.Rge1++-, with great material gains for White.

**13.f5 Bxc3 14.bxc3 d4!**

The only way to free the e6-bishop.

**15.Qxd4 Bxa2**



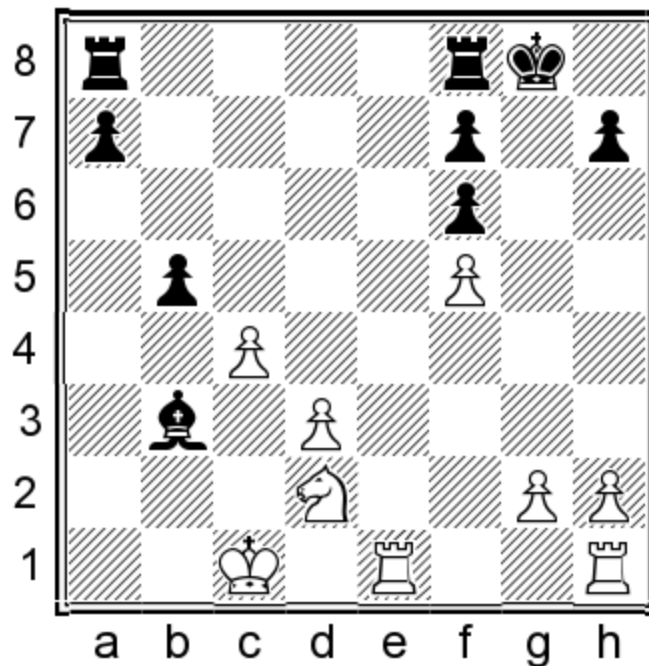
*Position after: 15...Bxa2*

Black's bishop is still not completely out of the woods as White intends to trap it with c4 after exchanging the queens.

**16.Qb4! Qxc5 17.Qxc5 Nxc5 18.c4 Nxd3+**

If Black wants to save the bishop they have to agree to fix White's damaged pawn structure.

**19.cxd3 Bb3 20.Rde1 b5 21.Bxf6 gxf6 22.Nd2<sup>2</sup>**

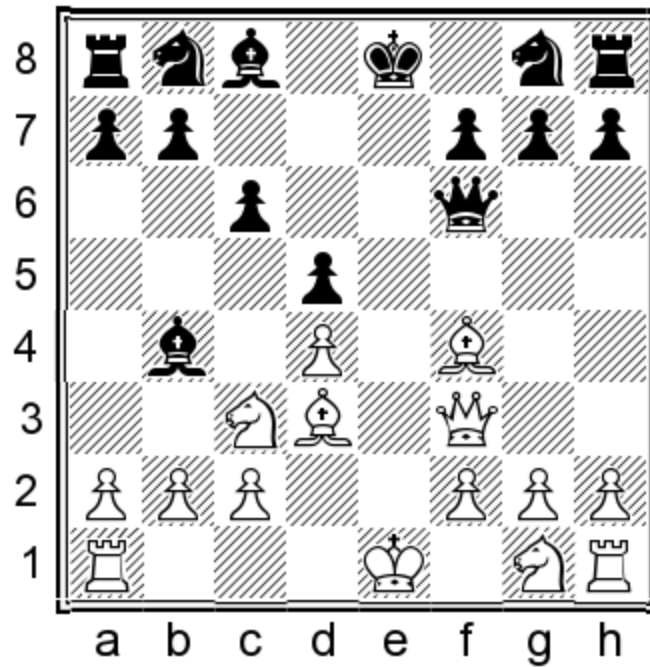


*Position after: 22.Nd2*

Finally the dust has settled and we have reached an endgame which is more preferable for White thanks to Black's broken pawns on the kingside and White's more active king (once it gets to c3 via b2, White's passed pawn may become very dangerous). I admit this variation is quite long but we need quite a lot of invention to get an opening advantage against such tenacious opposition.

**e) 5...c6 6.Qf3 Qf6**

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.exd5 exd5 5.Bd3 c6 6.Qf3 Qf6 7.Bf4**



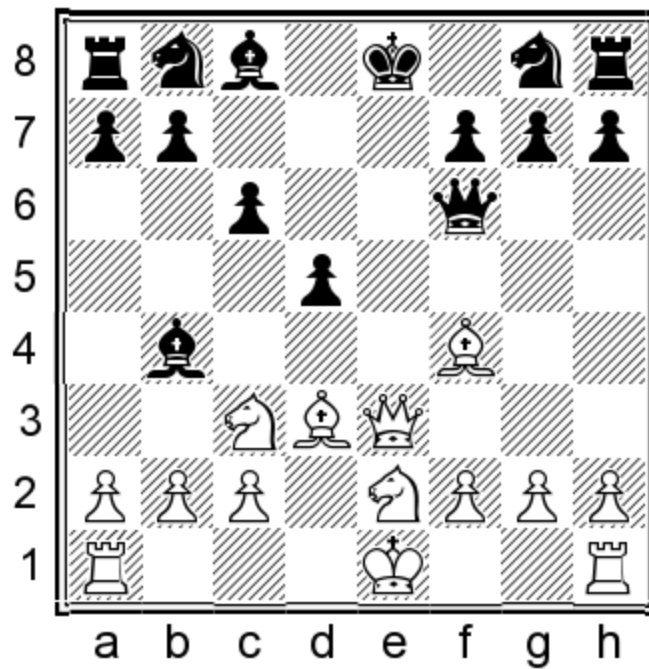
*Position after: 7.Bf4*

Once again we sacrifice a pawn for the initiative.

**7...Ne7**

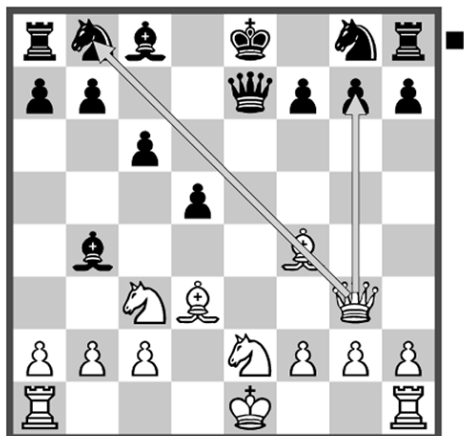
**A) 7...Qxd4** In the age of romantic chess it was a matter of honor to accept any sacrifice offered. Those days are of course long gone, but one still has to analyze the most principled option too whenever one sacrifices a pawn!

8.Nge2 Qf6 9.Qe3+!



*Position after: 9.Qe3+!*

9...Qe7 [9...Kf8 is very awkward and White has tremendous compensation after 10.0-0 Nd7 11.Rae1, because the black king's position is seriously limiting the enemy's coordination.; 9...Ne7 10.Be5± wins the important g7-pawn for White.] 10.Qg3!



*Position after: 10.Qg3!*



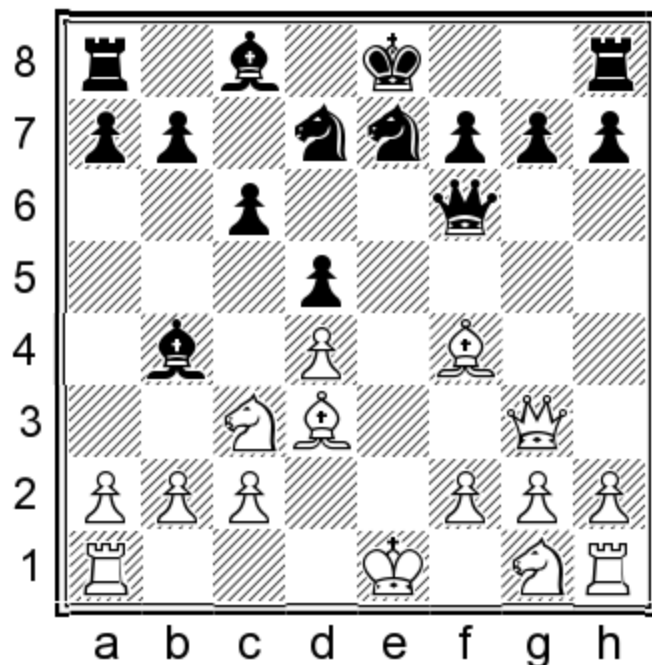
In fact, this is a double attack on b8 and g7, and therefore White regains the material with positional interest.

10...Nd7 11.Qxg7 Qf6 12.Qg3 Ne7 13.Bg5 Qe5 14.a3!<sup>2</sup>

White does not mind entering the endgame under the condition that Black opens the h-file for White's rook with ...Qxg3, hxg3. In any case, White keeps the lead in development and the more active pieces.

**B)** 7...Bf5?? drops a piece to 8.Be5+- 8.Qg3 Nd7

Now both 0-0-0 and Nge2 are nice for White.



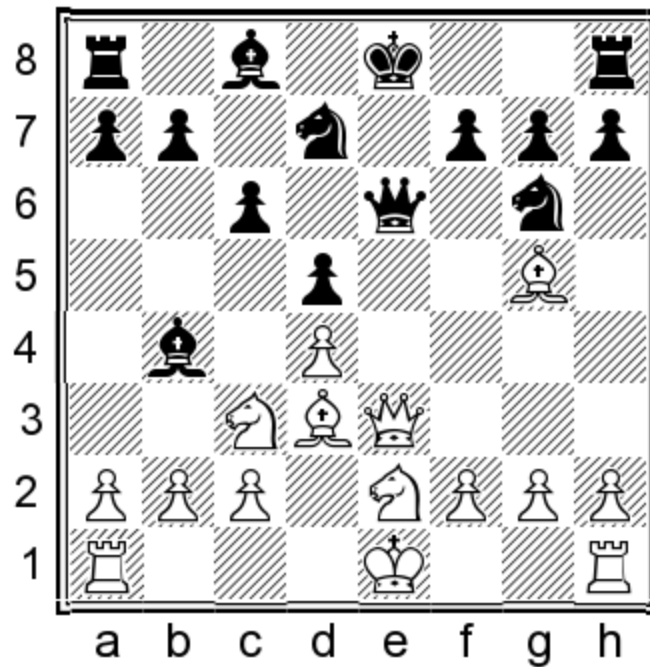
*Position after: 8...Nd7*

I played 9.Nf3 against GM Rapport and got a slightly better position in the game as well, though Black could have improved on his play.

**9.0-0-0**

9.Nge2

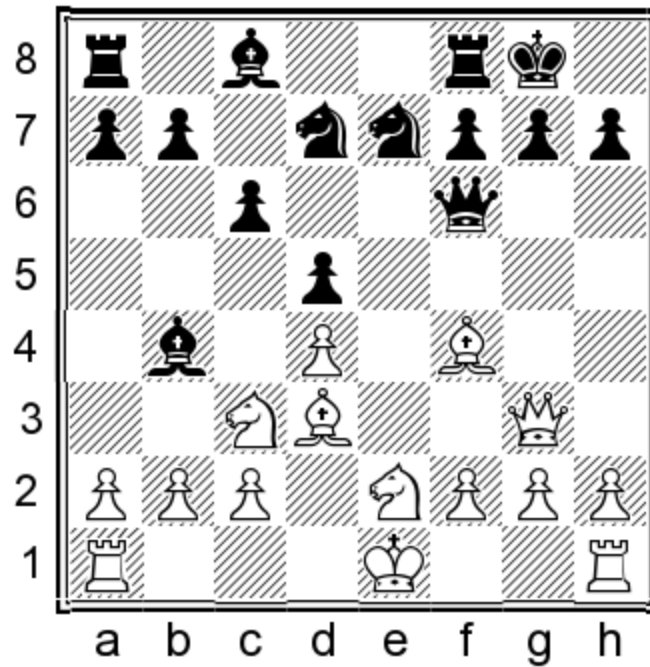
**A)** 9...Ng6 10.Bg5 Qd6 11.Qe3+ Qe6



*Position after: 11...Qe6*

does not promise Black full equality even though they manage to exchange the queens. 12.h4! The g6-knight's position is very unstable and we just grab more space. 12...Qxe3 13.Bxe3 Be7 14.h5 Nh4 15.Kf1<sup>2</sup> It will take Black some time to get their pieces coordinated again, and in the meantime we can develop with Ng3, Re1, and keep questioning the stability of the h4-knight.

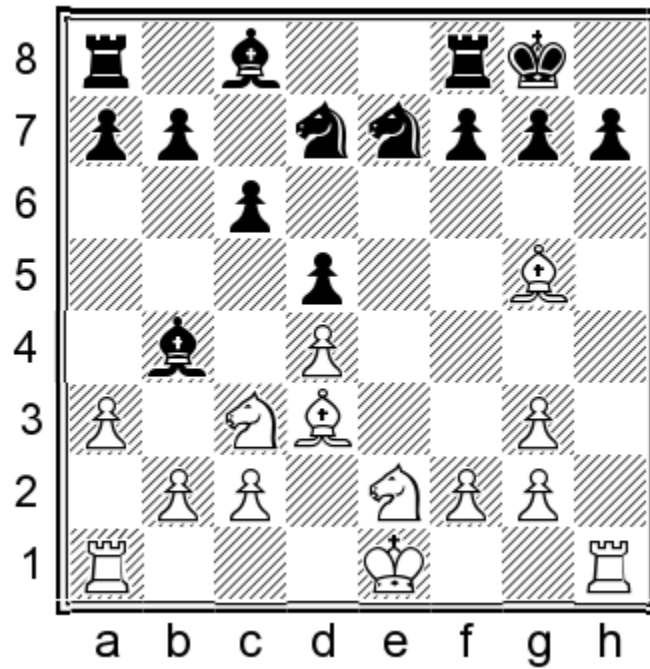
**B)** 9...0-0



*Position after: 9...0-0*

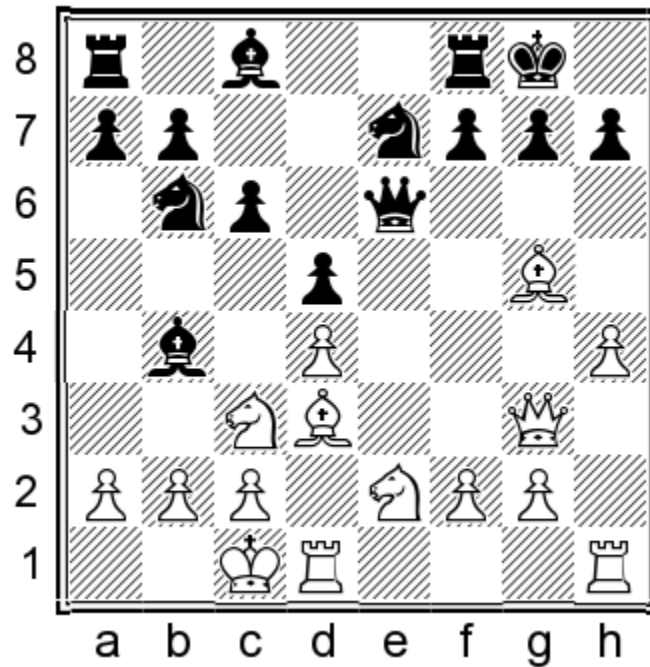
**B1)** 10.0-0-0 This move is analyzed in GM Vitiugov's book on the French (from Black's point of view), but it is an imprecision. Black equalizes with 10...Ng6 11.Bg5 Qd6 when after 12.a3 we are missing the option of Bxh7+ after 12...Qxg3 13.hxg3 as Black has managed to play ...Ng6 in time.

**B2)** 10.Bg5! Qe6 [10...Qd6 now runs into 11.a3! (an important move, forcing Black to capture on g3) 11...Qxg3 12.hxg3



*Position after: 12.hxg3*

and Black has to cede the bishop pair advantage as  
 12...Bd6 13.Bxh7+- loses an important pawn.] 11.0-0-0  
 Nb6 12.h4<sup>2</sup>



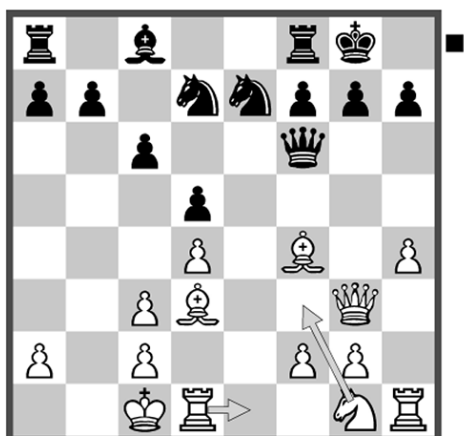
*Position after: 12.h4<sup>2</sup>*

White has a nice position with attacking chances in the center and on the kingside. Black's queen is rather stuck on e6.

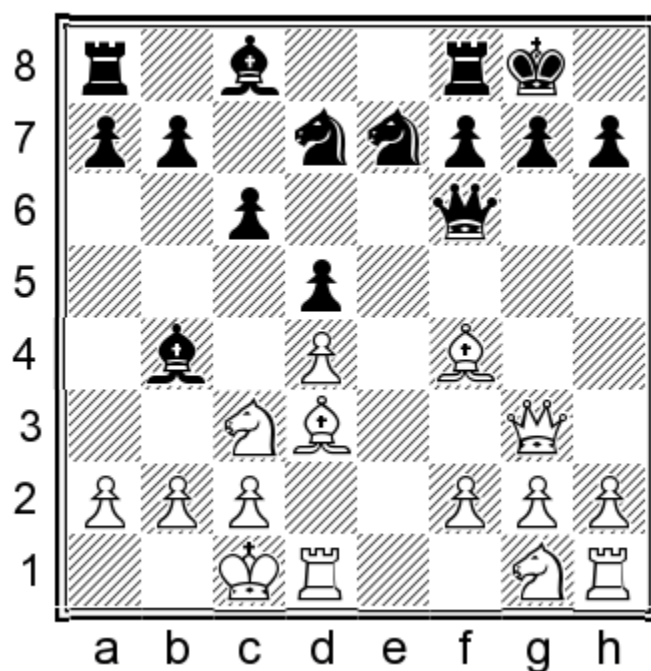
### **9...0-0**

Damaging White's pawn structure with 9...Bxc3 10.bxc3 causes much more damage to Black's position than to White's. The protector of Black's dark squares is gone and

it will be deeply missed after 10...0-0 11.h4+-,



*Position after: 11.h4+- when I daresay Black is already lost as they cannot defend their position against natural moves like Nf3 and Re1 for too long without their dark-squared bishop.*



*Position after: 9...0-0*

**10.Bg5**

10.Nf3 is a good option as well.

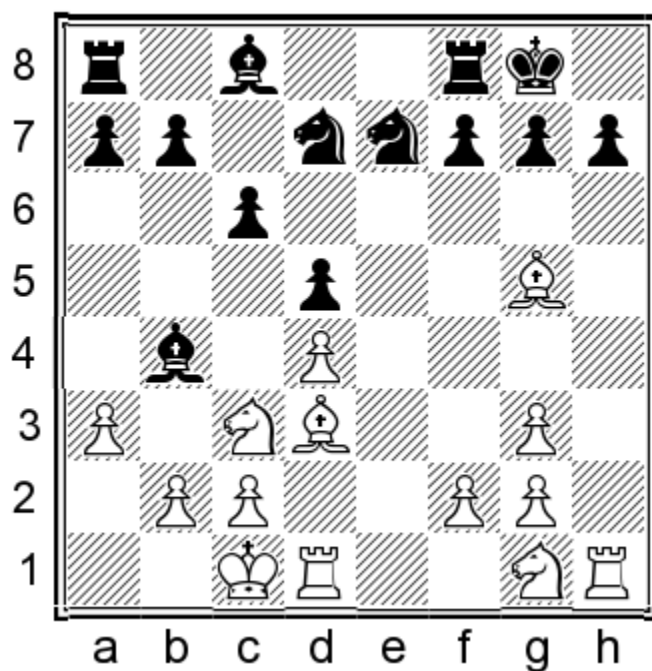
**A)** 10...Bxc3 11.bxc3± is never a good idea for Black in this kind of position. The dark-squared bishop is too important to be given away just like that.

**B)** 10...Nf5 11.Qh3 is embarrassing for the f5-knight. Due to the threat of mate on h7 it can only move to the lousy h6-square.

**C)** 10...Ng6 11.Bc7!, planning a quick h4-h5.

### 10...Qe6

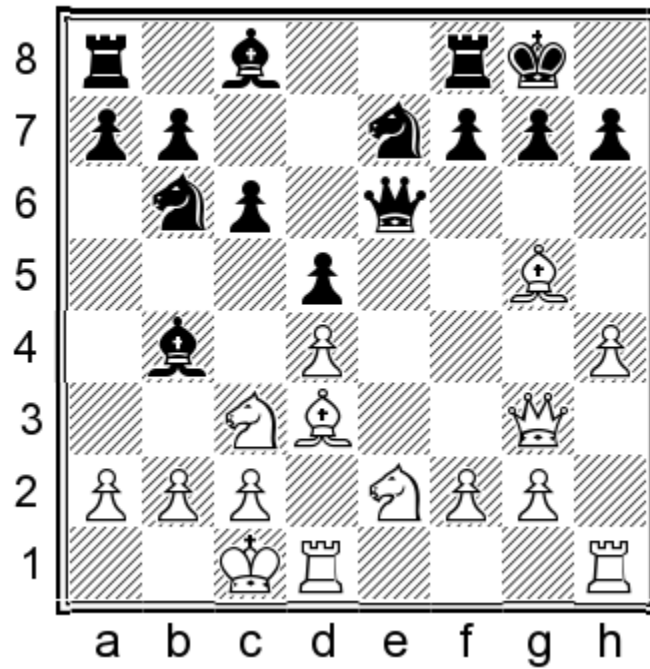
10...Qd6 11.a3! is an important trick. Here White is already winning a pawn as Black has to play 11...Qxg3 12.hxg3,



*Position after: 12.hxg3*

and the b4-bishop, the e7-knight, and the h7-pawn are all hanging and Black cannot defend everything at once.

12...Bxc3 13.Bxh7+!+- 11.Nge2 Nb6 12.h4<sup>2</sup>



*Position after: 12.h4<sup>2</sup>*

White has a nice position with attacking chances in the center and on the kingside. Black's queen is rather stuck on e6.